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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I LOVE TO read the Sunday paper. It is a ritual for me, one I have indulged in as long as I could read. On Sundays when I have nothing scheduled (and they've been too few lately), I read several papers, starting with the local paper and ending with *The New York Times*. I love the news, the various ways it's reported, the analysis, the opinions, and the gossip. I started my writing career as journalist, and on Sundays, it shows.

Lately, I've only had time to read the local paper, which is the largest in the state of Oregon, the *Oregonian*. Every Sunday, when I get to the book section, I get steamed. Somewhere some learned "reporter" is pontificating on the state of publishing—and getting it wrong.¹

This Sunday's offering, which I

read before I had even finished breakfast, came from a column called "Writing in the Rain." The author, Ellen Emry Heltzel, writes about writing and writers every week. Books and book people are her niche. Yet, as I read, I realized she knew very little about what she's writing about.

Let me give you an example. She interviewed a local writer, whose second novel is getting some push. His first novel, a mainstream paperback, was published in 1987. She writes:

[His book] sold a respectable 15,000 copies. Even though the influential *Sunday New York Times Book Review* trashed it, 46 other publications reviewed it, too, and [he] recalls that maybe a third gave him a thumbs up.

A mixed reception, per-

¹The *Oregonian* does have some knowledgeable columnists, most notably *F&SF* contributor Steve Perry, and mystery writer Vince Kohler, but their columns are "infrequent" because they do not deal with "serious" fiction.



U P D

H a r p e r

**FORTRESS IN THE EYE OF TIME** C. J. Cherryh**A tale as deep as legend and as intimate as love.**

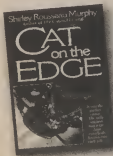
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A T E

Prism



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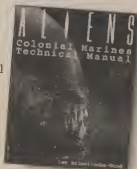
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haps, but not a bad beginning.

Then, surprisingly, [he] dropped off the map.²

What's wrong with this excerpt? Several things. First, in the corporate publishing environment of the last ten years, paperback sales of 15,000 copies is *not* respectable. For a mainstream novel, reviewed in 46 places, it is even worse. While this author got a lot of press, most of it (two-thirds) was bad. He couldn't claim critical or commercial success — and *not surprisingly*, he dropped off the map.³

How is all of this relevant to the readers of this magazine? Why should you folks care about a column in a paper whose circulation is smaller than the population of some cities, a column you, in all probability, have never read?

Because Ellen Emry Heltzel's column, mistake-ridden as it is, made me realize something. Most readers know nothing about book publishing. Not even people who should know, people who specialize in the industry, understand how mass market publishing works. They don't understand the role of editor,

agent, and publisher. They don't know how much (if any) clout they have as readers. And most of all, they don't understand how market forces affect the books they see on the stands.

Do they need to? I think so, and here's why.

How many times have you read books one and two of a trilogy, and have never been able to find book three? How many times has someone recommended a book to you, and when you finally get around to looking for that book the only place that carries it is the local used bookstore? How many of your favorite authors have just disappeared? Why don't your favorite short story writers have more novels in print? Why is the hard science fiction novel dying on the stands? Why are there so many fantasy novels? And what happened to the horror boom of a few years ago? How come there are so many legal thrillers these days, and why does every suspense novel come fully equipped with a serial killer?

If you answered any of those questions with "because nobody cares" or "because publishing's all

²The Sunday Oregonian, March 10, 1996.

³Ironically, she didn't understand his comeback either. This author's second novel is a vampire novel set in L.A. — two hotter trends in publishing which he managed to hit at exactly the right time. Whether this book is going to be a commercial or critical success remains to be seen.

run by big business these days" or "because no one can write any more," you're wrong.

People in publishing care a great deal about their profession. I have yet to meet an editor who is in this business for the money. Publishers watch the bottom line because that's their job, but every publisher I've met loves books and reading as much as or more than I do.

Big business does have its hand in publishing, and that has caused a lot of changes. A few changes were good. Most are bad. This industry, which once ran on a handshake, does no longer. And that makes it hard for the naïve writer, the one who is in the arts because he hates the business world. It has also had some serious effects on readers.

And a lot of people can write, and write well. Not all of these people are being published — nor should they be. Writing is not about crafting pretty sentences. It is about storytelling.

So in the next few editorials, I'm going to discuss the book business and how it affects the readers. I will focus on commercial publishing in general, the science fiction/fantasy/horror genre in particular. I will explain sales figures, million dollar advances, and the role of the reviewer. Along the way we will


glimpse how careers are made, how they're broken, and how they can be resurrected.

For those of you who think this will be as dry as your Econ 101 class in college, let me assure you that along the way, we will cover scandals and heartbreaks. I am very passionate about this field. I live it, as both writer and editor. I teach classes in it, and I stir things up occasionally in my role as non-fiction gadfly.

And these editorials have an ulterior motive. First, of course, I want to teach. Secondly, I want to bring some publishing practices out of the darkness and hold them up to the light. Finally — and most importantly — I want to empower you as readers. I want to make you informed consumers.

So, as this short series goes along, send me your questions, your frustrations and your hopes. I'll try to answer as many of them as I can within these few pages.

I guess my Sunday morning habit has revived the journalist in me. I learned, in a hot crowded newsroom many years ago, that getting angry never helps.

Getting angry and writing about it, though, can sometimes make a difference. 

After a year's absence, Michael Cassutt returns to our July issue. His stunning, understated science fiction has been a staple of the July issues through the nineties.

Michael's short fiction is a rarity. He spends much of his time working in Hollywood, most recently on Strange Luck. The seed for this story was planted when Michael was driving home from Vancouver after leaving the Outer Limits. He stopped in Eugene, and we discussed the kinds of fiction no one was writing any more — including the future-of-space science fiction. I said Michael was uniquely qualified to write it, since he co-wrote non-fiction with Buzz Aldrin. Michael took me up on the challenge, and the result is "The Longer Voyage."

The Longer Voyage

By Michael Cassutt

THE LAST TIME JULIAN TALLET visited Node Canaveral for maintenance Ulrich Charz was Mission Administrator, Mission Population was officially two thousand, three hundred, and initial operating capacity was eight years away. Since then Julian had aged six years: the new M.A. was Alf Riordan, Mission Pop was now authorized at an even four thousand, and initial operating capacity was twelve years away. Two improvements, two deteriorations.

"I like the air here," Ty said from the driver's seat, and promptly sneezed.

Julian didn't, though he felt like sneezing, too. He rarely thought about the air, except when he happened to see Hong Kong videos about skullduggery on Mission in which nobody *ever* sneezed. Mission's air filtration system had been under review since the first nodes were opened, but space dwellers had been sneezing an average of a hundred times a day since Mir, a century back.

Julian didn't have Ty's sensitivities even though both were gen twos — born on Mission. Ty was developmentally challenged and looked like a concept for an advanced human being as imagined during the early Space Age: long, spindly arms and legs, pale complexion, head too large for his body. Mission Personnel officially deployed him as a "therapeutic test subject" and paid him a salary, but what he really did was drive Julian's cart and make occasional observations. But, then, the citizens of the early Space Age would have called Mission a starship. And would have had it halfway to Alpha Cen by now.

"It smells like polin," Julian said, finding it hard to put a label on the sensation through his general fog of ill health.

"What's polin?"

Julian pointed to the patch of green serving as an interface between the smooth silvery glaze of the "street" and the glassy vertical plate that hid the innards of the LockMart office just ahead. (Mission Management types here in Node Canaveral had a taste for classic Earth styles.) "It's a grass-like vegetative matter, native to Kazakstan. Not edible." Ty wore a read-only patch that would help him with words like "vegetative" and even "Kazakstan," but it was important to add the business about lack of edibility. Especially when Ty got out of the cart and went to investigate. "Want some."

Julian sighed and tried, without success, to get comfortable. He was overdue for maintenance. His clothes were tight around the waist; he hated to wake up in the morning. His hair was grayer every time he looked in a mirror. At the age of thirty-eight minus one day he was facing the fact that he was as good as he was going to get at anything you cared to name: deal-making or love-making. There had even been moments when he would have surrendered to integration, to allow Mission Personnel to deploy him to some nice job in Commercial Support, maybe.

The fact that he would even consider integration convinced him he had to risk maintenance. So now he lurked around a Node Canaveral contractor site, waiting for Duwayne to return from his face sweep of the maintenance center. Duwayne was fully integrated into the official Mission network as well as the many illegal and unregistered data bands that made up the undernet, but sometimes you just had to see things with your own eyes.

"Mr. Tallet!" Ty called. Julian pried himself out of the cart and went to him. "Look what I found." Ty was standing on the patch of polin and pointing to the window. It had been defaced with a large painted tag that said: "A.C. Death."

The A.C. and the Death were joined by a smudge, probably some defining punctuation, even a short word such as *or*. Alpha Cen or Death. The only people on Mission who talked much about Alpha Cen were Management, and it pleased Julian to think of some frustrated Level E type expressing his rage at the eternal delays in this way. Nevertheless, Julian figured the tag was the work of a gen two, probably a boy about fourteen. It had a clear hand and cursive capitals, like something from an ancient handbook on penmanship. Lots of gen twos had taken up cursive writing as a way of communicating outside the net; Julian carried his own pencil and notebook for the same reason.

Of course, for gen twos the missing punctuation would be an equals sign. Alpha Cen = Death.

Julian's attention was drawn by Duwayne's return. "Now there's a nice job," Duwayne said, nodding at the tag as he slipped into the back seat. "I'm surprised Facilities hasn't gotten to it."

"Facilities probably likes graffiti. It's Internal Affairs that will be interested."

"I.A. probably left it there to catch the tagger," Duwayne said.

"I.A. probably put it there in the first place to target subversives."

Duwayne found this bit of paranoia amusing. He was compact, normal or even good-looking, but, like Ty, somehow incomplete. Whereas Ty had flaws in his genetic programming, Duwayne had simply developed a bad attitude. He was officially deployed to Agon Systems, one of the many Mission contractors, as a communications specialist. Since Julian currently consulted for Agon Systems, he had inherited Duwayne.

Ty returned to the cart as Julian asked Duwayne, "Are we clear?"

It wasn't Internal Affairs Julian usually worried about, but his rival contractors. "Better yet," Duwayne said. "Somebody did a sweep for us. I'm looking at their plot now. It's very tidy." The cart zoomed out of the shadows and down the empty street toward maintenance.

"Who?"

"Somebody from Management."

The cart was a modified battery-powered tractor originally used to move cargo around the high bay in Node Baikonur. Crushed during one of the frequent spinquakes of years past, it had been written off until a Biker mechanic working for Julian had restored the body, replacing grappling gear with a stretched cab. It would hold four passengers, three of them comfortably.

No one on Mission truly required motorized transport: a walk of nine hundred meters in any axis would return you to the spot you started. Unfortunately, with the various node separators, not to mention lifts and hatchways, it was impossible to walk more than twenty meters in any direction. If you traveled a lot and occasionally delivered gifts, as Julian did, a cart came in handy.

The drive was a short one. No other vehicles were parked in front of maintenance — Management suits were officially required to travel on foot, though those that actually hewed to this rule were so few that Julian suspected he knew them all by name. And as he walked into maintenance he began to feel a bit nervous.

There were three sections to maintenance, one for emergencies, and one each for gen ones and gen twos, who had different requirements. "So, which one is he in?" Julian asked Duwayne, meaning the person from Management. It wasn't an entirely casual question.

"Gen Two section." This bit of data narrowed the possible candidates to one, and Julian suddenly felt even worse. He turned to Duwayne. "Let's make it another day."

Duwayne returned from the undernet long enough to register surprise. "But we just got here! They're already loaded for you."

"Let them reload another day."

"What about the party tomorrow?"

Well, there was that. Before Julian could decide he saw that it was too late. The Management patient, already shaved and capped, was in the doorway, and there was no way to avoid a face. "Julian Tallet," the man said. "I wondered what all the fuss was about." He turned around, then paused: "Come on in. Don't be shy."

Offended by the man's attitude — "I don't care if he is Management!" — Duwayne took a step toward him.

But Julian held him back. "It's all right," Julian said. "He's my brother."

The two techs had not overtaxed themselves in helping Roy Tallet with his patches, but that changed the moment they saw Julian. Not only were they suddenly free with soothing words and attentions, but one of them managed to help Roy back to his table. "I should have arranged this deliberately," Roy said.

"You'll never convince me you didn't," Julian said, taking his own place.

"So many edges, Julian," Roy said, "in such a cylindrical world."

To Julian this was no more accurate than most of Roy's judgments. For one thing, Mission was not truly cylindrical, but more of a cake with layers of different shapes and diameters. Even the social model was something multi-dimensional. For another, Julian's personality had fewer corners than did Roy's...and Julian had the scans to prove it. But the new blood spurting into his veins was already having its mellowing effect. "You're looking good," was all he said to Roy. It almost killed him to admit it, but put the two of them side by side, and anyone would think Roy was younger.

"Management is generous with its maintenance plan." Both men lay back and closed their eyes. "You could have the same schedule, too. All you have to do is —"

"— Accept integration. No, thank you. I like my privacy."

"We have privacy." Roy had accepted integration at the age of thirteen, when Julian was almost eleven. "Besides, that's not the issue. It's been twenty-five years since the divorce. You're still punishing Dad for broken promises."

Julian knew that Roy had used Mission net to pull up Julian's personality scans — the one element of his life that was unavoidably integrated, since you couldn't get maintained without being scanned. Not only was his medical data in Mission net, but also a wonderfully colored fractal-edged chart of his personality. Blue for the various intelligence and aptitude tests in addition to his grades in Mission's school system. Green for physical data. Yellow for the blending of his parents' scans. Red for personality map — and running through the latter two, like a regular goddamn Grand Canyon, was the black rift of his parent's divorce.

But Julian had his own theory about how the two Tallet boys had turned out so differently. "It's because of broken promises," Julian said quietly. "But not Dad's."

Julian did not know when the International ExtraSolar SETI Response Initiative — better known as Mission — actually began. The official myth placed it immediately after the detection of mysterious signals from the tail of the constellation Southern Cross in Fiscal Year 2022. Those signals had been “unscrambled” and “enhanced” in a variety of ways; analysts had concluded that the signals consisted of either a “message” to the galaxy at large, or perhaps some sort of radio entertainment. Neither conclusion was universally accepted, though the fact of some signal-generating entity elsewhere in the (relatively near) galactic neighborhood was indisputable. Based on data from the Pickering series of probes (F.Y. 2049-2061) the SETI source had been provisionally assigned the name “Eden.” Whether this was strictly true, Eden had the virtue of being much more Earthlike than any body in the solar system save Earth itself.

The more popular countermyth said that Mission was born when it finally became clear, sometime in the Forties, that human beings were never going to be able to colonize Mars, not without significant reconstruction. (On the humans, that is. The idea of actually modifying a whole planet had been consigned to the same historical dumpster as communism, ethnic harmony and free television.) The existence of an apparently Earthlike world in orbit around the star Alpha Cen A provided a goal that promised greater return for less expense than rebuilding several thousand humans, even allowing for the awesome distance of eight light-years, which meant a transit time of forty-five years using the most advanced propulsion system then conceived, the Indonesian cryo-fusion burner.

Julian subscribed to a third myth, that the SETI signals were bogus and the entire Mission was a planetary pork barrel project, a means of redirecting excess capital into spinoff research and development. (The global economy had gone through an unprecedented period of robustness in the Thirties, thanks to the death of the western baby boomer generation, which had distorted and tyrannized culture and finance for its entire seventy-five year run.)

The original plan, baseline F.Y. 2039, called for Mission to reach initial operating capacity — I.O.C. — on 1 October 2086, with injection into a trans-Alpha trajectory to follow in that fiscal year. Julian Tallet was born on Mission in F.Y. 2074, when I.O.C. was holding firm at F.Y. 2086, when there was a chance that while Julian and the other gen twos would

spend twenty or more years of their life in transit, they would still walk on the shores of Eden.

F.Y. 2086 came and went without I.O.C., without departure for Alpha Cen. At the age of eighteen Julian was selected for the flight operations track, and all his schooling from that point on concerned orbital mechanics, simulator technologies and program management, since the design of the actual Eden landing craft would not be frozen until Mission reached the new world. As part of his flight training he was also allowed to don wings and flap around the high bay in Bike under low spin.

For six years Julian trained as a Mission pilot, knowing he would be in his forties before he got a chance to use his skill. Then the cryo-fusion system designed to be installed on Mission blew up during final qualification tests, irradiating the entire Cape York test center, and killing three hundred and eleven people.

I.O.C. slipped from "next year" to a minimum of eight years when the Level A managers in Munich switched from cryo-fusion to an older technology called SteadiState, and the projected transit time, low Earth orbit to low Eden orbit, increased from twenty-five to sixty years. Even allowing for the possible Lorenz-Fitzgerald stretching of lifespan, Julian and the other gen twos realized they had no chance of ever walking on Eden. At the rate things were going, they would be lucky to live long enough to see departure.

"You should have stayed in Management and done something about it."

"You were smarter than me, Roy. If you couldn't fix things, what was I supposed to do?" He decided to change the subject. "How's Hannah?"

"Fine. Her branch is in charge of this burn." Roy hesitated, then said, "How about Sophie?"

"I don't know," Julian said, carefully. He and Sophie had been together for two years, the same amount of time he had worked with Agon Systems. He had noticed a depressing pattern in his life — one relationship per job. All Julian knew was that this breakup had been the most painful yet. With Sophie he had begun to allow himself to consider marriage, children. Most of his friends (a group which did not include Ty or Duwayne) had chanced one or the other; some both. Julian had begun to feel left out.

But then he remembered his own rage at learning of his own life sentence aboard Mission. He did not want to be target of that sort of rage from his own children. He had made that clear to Sophie. Who was now gone.

Now he was left wondering if he was going to change jobs.

"How are you doing for money?"

This was another sore subject. Theoretically every gen two — every person officially listed as a member of Population — had a deployment and a salary. The salaries were subject to mandatory deductions for base habitation, facilities use (including air), medical maintenance and diet. You'd have to try hard to starve aboard Mission, but the salary actually left little for what Management termed elective/quality-of-life purchases. Julian had gotten into trouble that way in the past, charging against his salary until Finance stopped him. Several times he had had to go to Roy for money, though not lately.

"I'm keeping ahead," Julian replied. "I realize I still owe you..."

Roy waved that off, which infuriated Julian even more than having it brought up in the first place. "I figured you'd be able to make money at Agon." He sighed. "Everybody does."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They're bad guys, Julian."

"They're licensed contractors, Roy."

"They're the next best thing to *Mafia* —" Suddenly aware that every tech in maintenance was eagerly listening, Roy shut up.

Searching for some way to salvage the conversation, Julian said, "I'm having a party tomorrow night. My birthday."

"I know," Roy said. "I'm still your brother."

"Why don't you bring Hannah, if you can get her to go south of Korou?"

"We have a burn scheduled."

"There's never been a burn in Mission history that took place on time."

"Julian...I didn't come here to pick a fight." That they would fight was inevitable. They were gen two kids, the children of the hated contractors who had fought their way into Management. But while Julian had quit, Roy had risen all the way to Level C, the highest onboard authority. He had

compounded the insult by marrying a woman from a Management family, too. Julian turned his head and looked directly at Roy, amazed at how much he resembled their father.

Now Roy said, "You and your...associates wouldn't be trying to bias the burn in any way."

There was always a pool on Mission events. "Since when do you care about the leisure activities of the underclass?"

"Whenever it affects Mission safety."

"Is this an official inquiry?"

"Do you have any official data?"

Julian wished again that Roy had skipped law school. "Here's what I can tell you: if there are any friendly, private wagers on private networks — did I mention the word 'private'?"

Roy had the grace to smile. "I believe so."

"They are reactive, not proactive. To put it another way, nobody is trying to fix your fucking burn."

"Relax. I was really just asking."

Julian was surprised at his own vehemence. Because for the first time in his two years with Agon, he realized he didn't know the answer to Roy's question.

Roy smiled faintly. "I'm going to try to get to your party." He rolled his shoulder. "You'd think with all the maintenance we've had, we'd be in better shape."

"For human beings a world this small is toxic."

"Come on, Julian. We *designed* it."

"Maybe you did." Then he lay back and let the sweet new blood flow. For a brief moment, at this point in the very long, never really begun voyage, A.C. *didn't* equal death.

MISSION WAS theoretically self-sufficient, with air, water and waste purified and recycled for an indefinite period, assuming strict Population control, though most Red Team simulations suggested that eighty years was a more realistic system life than infinity. That is, the "closed" Eco system would sustain itself for at least that long, which was still beyond the maximum allowable duration for the trans-Alpha voyage. (In some simu-

lations the optimum system lifetime actually allowed for a round trip — 160 years — providing, of course, that Population decreased.) Renewable resources had already been detected on Eden early in the design process so that refueling at Alpha Cen was the primary mode, while a closed system with return was only a backup.

Eco was an in-house Management program in which Agon Systems was the major subcontractor. This fit nicely with the company's role in Facilities, which was collecting garbage. With Population constantly changing, not to mention the on-going construction and repairs, garbage was a serious problem. Scrap metal and composites could be redeployed to the Fabrik program, Mission's own manufacturing arm. But everything else, from plain old litter to discarded toys to dust in the air had to be tracked, retrieved, and dealt with.

Julian didn't have an office; Agon Systems had converted to virtual facilities a century back, so most mornings found Julian planted at a table to the rear of the Seagull, a cafe that catered to Bikers. With his laptop and Duwayne nearby Julian monitored the endless flow of Mission debris. He also monitored various cargo manifests, Mission or informal, controlling the flow of materials, information and people into and out of the high bay. The challenge was knowing how much of a shipment was capable of being "lost" or "damaged," and who to compensate, and with what.

Mission did much of its own processing, turning chemicals into composites, and sometimes the other way around. But there was a gratifying percentage of the Population which was still willing to pay for exotic food from Earth...fashions...hardware...data. (Information and entertainment were beamed directly aboard, though Management controlled the intra-Mission network.) Software judged violent, subversive or otherwise incorrect was subject to censorship; Julian was happy to shift it to the undernet.

This morning was particularly busy because a Chinese vehicle had docked, one of ten officially manifested resupply flights per year. It wasn't until after lunch that Julian was able to ask Duwayne to go up on Mission net. "Tell me about this SteadiState propulsion event."

Duwayne blinked, then came back into focus. "It's been in development since F.Y. 25 or so, originally intended for constant-boost outer planet missions. Abandoned."

"Because of technical problems?"

"Fiscal. SteadiState's just too expensive. There were some instabilities during its initial use...one loss of vehicle in F.Y. 79 contributed to replacement by another system."

"Anything anywhere to show that it's not a good idea? Red Team reports?"

"Nothing on Mission."

"Well. Is it going to light up on time?"

"It's running two hours late."

Julian stood up. That was typical. "Duwayne...do you ever wonder what you'd do if it worked?"

"Propulsion? You mean, if we actually got to departure?"

"Yeah."

Duwayne mulled this for a moment, his consciousness spread over God knew what pages of the nets, then smiled. "You're kidding, right? Mission's never going to go anywhere."

"Suppose it did. Suppose they stopped the resupply flights and kicked out everybody who wasn't in Population. Buttoned her up and said, 'Next stop is Alpha Cen...sixty years.'"

"I'd be on the last flight down."

"Don't want to see Eden?"

"I've seen it from Pickering." He nodded toward the view of dayside Africa rolling past on the television. "It looks like that, only colder."

"You've been here your whole life. What are you going to do downstairs?"

"I don't know. But at least I won't be off-line." Duwayne was as fully integrated as anyone Julian knew. He spent most of his waking moments — probably his dreaming ones, too — awash in data and imagery. For him, trying to live without the nets would be like trying to live without air. Which was reason number three that Julian had never accepted integration. Duwayne said, "My parents signed up to go to Alpha Cen, not me. It's not my fault they died before they got their chance." He smiled. "A.C. equals death."

Julian realized that a lot of gen twos agreed with Duwayne, yet the attitude suddenly annoyed him. "Duwayne, you've never been cold. Never been rained on. They have *weather* downstairs. They have dirt. The

Mission's a pretty small town, too. How would you like to be sharing space with ten million people? I bet you wouldn't last five minutes in Munich."

"I bet I won't have to."

"Did you put anything into this burn pool?"

"I don't do that. The house cooks the books."

He couldn't believe the words were coming out of his mouth. Not because they weren't true, but because he didn't really want to pick on Duwayne. "Ah, let's get ready for a party."

Julian lived minus-x-ward of Node Canaveral in Node Palmachim, the oldest residential volume on Mission, one plus-x from Bike. It was probably safer there than in the heavily patrolled Management node, especially for Julian, who had many supportive friends, but its drawback was that it was ugly, nothing but a hilly street of warehouses scarred by collisions with Bike haulers and marked by forty years of tags.

Assuming that Sophie would not show up, Julian had allowed Duwayne to invite as many female "visitors" as he wanted — which turned out to be a trio of entertainers who said they were planning to head back downstairs to Branson, Missouri, any day now.

He sent Ty with the cart to pick up Roy and Hannah; to Julian's great surprise, Roy accepted, bringing Hannah's regrets. "She's on the trajectory panel and doesn't want to miss the countdown."

Just as well: Julian had not seen Hannah since the wedding. A Management female wouldn't know what to say to someone like him.

Roy examined the volume. He did not need a calculator to judge its size. "I think I'm going to let you pay me back after all," he told Julian. "You have three times the volume Dr. Riordan has." Riordan was Mission Administrator, the highest Level C manager on site.

"I thought Management principles mandated equal volume for all."

"Several years ago two guys in D offered to give up their volume to enlarge the M.A.'s suite."

"He's got all those meetings to hold..."

"It was seen to be quite a noble gesture."

"And what happened to them, Roy?"

"One of them is now Dr. Riordan."

"And you complain about my business." Julian nodded at one of the hostesses, who brought over the tray of drinks. Julian helped himself as Roy looked them over carefully. "If you don't see anything you like, name it and I'll get it." When Roy continued to hesitate, Julian realized what the problem was. "I guess Management doesn't want its integrated managers to be substance abusers. They must really track you all the time."

Roy picked up a clear drink. "Not *all* the time." He clinked glasses clumsily with Julian. "Happy birthday."

Julian watched Roy scan the crowd — not a large one, in spite of the available volume. It was still rather early in the evening for Mission's underclass to be out. The crowd was evenly split between men over thirty years of age and women under. "Amazing," Roy finally said. "Most of your guests don't appear to exist. Population can't match any of these faces with files."

"Some of them are visitors."

"Visitors have their own category in Population, Julian. How do they stay maintained? Mission won't cover you if you're not in Population. If you haven't been officially deployed."

Julian shrugged. "Maybe Mission's database isn't as comprehensive as it's supposed to be. Clearly everybody here is maintained — "

" — And they *all* appear to be working." Roy shook his head. "It's quite an operation you have here."

"I can't take credit for it."

"I wasn't going to give you credit. I just said it was amazing. "

Julian busied himself for a moment by accepting a second drink, or was it his third? "Roy...you said something yesterday that was interesting."

"About how you're still punishing Dad?"

This was worse than asking Roy for money. All the worse because Julian didn't know for sure that somebody in Agon Systems, or, more likely, with access to Agon Systems, was going to screw up the burn. But having been a part of this operation for two years now, he had learned to trust his instincts, especially when it came to events like this. And his instincts were telling him there was influence.

But what did he want Roy to do? Unleash Internal Affairs? Agon would never allow that, and the moment they discovered Julian's involve-

ment (and they would), he was in big trouble. It was one thing to play games with Management and Personnel: getting Agon mad at you was a form of suicide. Julian might have to move downstairs. He might be lucky to survive to make the move.

"What you said about getting into Management."

Roy must have stared at him for a full five seconds. "That's a surprise. Integration and all?"

"I don't know about *that*. I just said — "

" — That you were interested in going back to Management — "

" — That I was interested in what you said." Neither one of them was going to make the first concession. "Look, forget it."

"Not a chance. I'm fascinated. Something really big must have happened since this afternoon, to make my kid brother give up the glamorous life of gambling, drugs and smuggling — "

That did it. "Climb down from the pedestal, Roy. Mission runs its lotteries, manufactures its own drugs and makes sure Managers have first pick. The import-export laws change everytime somebody in Munich sneezes. Some of us don't fit in Mission. We're just making our own world."

"Which looks a lot like the bad one we left behind."

Julian nodded toward the television. Blue and brown, Earth rolled past, three hundred miles below. "You haven't managed to leave yet."

Pleading fatigue, Roy left after an acceptable hour's attendance, at which point Julian lost interest in his party. It wasn't intended to honor him so much as it was a chance for his associates to eat and drink for free. He had begun to pay attention to one of the Branson singers, a woman named Hope, when Duwayne found him. "Sorry to bother you," he said. "I.A."

Julian removed Hope from his lap. "Here?"

"The Seagull." Duwayne fell back into the net for a moment, then surfaced. "It's two Internal Affairs teams — must be up from Munich, since they're not in Population."

Julian was already stepping over his more persistent party-goers on the way out the door. Duwayne struggled to walk while staying up on Mission. "What are they doing?"

Another pause. "Facing Ty and his people. Picking stuff up."

"Any activity on either net?"

"Mission's devoted to that burn, now at T-minus-six hours. Undernet has the usual."

"This is insane."

He and Duwayne ran out to the cart and headed for the access point that would take them across to Node Baikonur.

MISSION HAD a unique legal status. No nation or group of nations had any sovereignty over it. Originally its model was Antarctica, an "open" center for research. But habitation at the Antarctic stations was limited; people went home after their tours. There was no permanent population.

During the early assembly phase Mission was treated as a commercial facility, like an ocean-oil platform, except that the "corporation" which funded Mission was a consortium of nations, some of whom were virulently opposed to commercial ventures. Again, commercial facilities did not have permanent residents.

All through the development and assembly phases there were popular stories — even a couple of Hong Kong movies — about Mission becoming an independent nation, with its own laws, currency, government. It was the kind of thing gen twos talked about when they were in their early teens and forgot about when they started having sex.

Mission remained a *vehicle*: the permanent Population was, legally, no such thing. Julian and Roy, for example, were technically citizens of the United States, since that was what their parents were. Never mind that Julian had come no closer to the U.S. than a vertical separation of at least two hundred and fifty miles; he had the right to return there as a voting citizen. The same applied to the rest of Population.

Only when Mission burned out of orbit on a trans-Alpha Cen trajectory would it begin moving toward any kind of actual independence. From what Julian had heard, when he bothered to pay attention, Management was still struggling to address the form of this government, and the transition to it.

In practical terms, however, Mission was technically a free port. The only laws were Management directives, and in at least one international

court case these had been shown to be quite limited, dealing mostly with Mission property — in effect, Management could enforce directives only among its actual employees. Other members of Population, seventy percent of whom actually worked for contractors, could abide by or ignore the directives as they chose, subject only to possible loss of contract with Management.

Agon Systems, the corporation, preferred its own rules. As far as it was concerned, there were no Sunday closing laws. No casino or liquor licenses. No censorship. And Management's Internal Affairs staff was only an annoyance.

There were three of them in the Seagull when Julian and Duwayne arrived, two men and a woman, visitors as far as Julian knew. "What do you think you're doing here?" Julian said.

"Searching for stolen Mission property," the woman snapped.

"Have you been authorized by Agon Systems?" Julian said.

One of the men was already shoving a pass in front of Julian's nose. Julian glanced at Duwayne, who could only shrug. Apparently they had gotten somebody in the company to allow them access. Well, Agon Systems was so large it was often at war with its own best interests. "Search away," Julian said.

Ty was in a state. "Can't we make them leave?"

"Sure. But they'll fight and then someone will get hurt." And that would mean more dealing with maintenance and Management and, worst of all, Agon Systems' insurance directorate. Even Ty knew what that meant.

"Look out!" Duwayne shouted, as a shelf unit suddenly got detached from the wall and fell crashing to the floor. One of the I.A. goons stepped over it, crunching a collection of data disks. "Mr. Tallet, you've got to stop this!"

Julian was already reaching for the phone. "Roy? Julian." He hadn't expected Roy to be home in bed with Hannah, and he wasn't. He was at what looked to be mission operations. "I see you got your second wind."

"You didn't call to give me a hard time about leaving the party."

"No. Your I.A. goons are trashing my office. I want them out of here."

"I don't have anything to do with Internal Affairs. Management sees it as a conflict, since I have relatives with bad associates."

Julian glanced at Duwayne, who was monitoring the conversation on Mission. He shrugged. "He's telling the truth. He doesn't have control or even access."

"Then let's just call it a coincidence. You get in touch with me for the first time in years...then this raid happens the night of the big burn."

"You made this choice," Roy snapped. He looked truly angry. "You've bounced from one goddamn disaster to another because, I don't know, somebody disappointed you. Well, maybe it's time to grow up. Your actions have consequences. You chose to work with Agon Systems — let them take care of you."

"I'll do that," Julian said. And broke the connection. He turned to Duwayne. "What are our options?"

"Regarding?"

"Biasing their burn."

Duwayne smiled for the first time since Julian had known him. "We're pretty well insinuated into their nets. There's a pre-loaded virus that will infect flight control systems, then commit suicide after ten generations."

"What would it do to their burn?"

"Let's just say there won't be a burn. Not on time, anyway. Not today."

"Then do it." Let Management decide what it really wanted, a clean Mission or a Mission that worked. Julian started to walk away, but turned back. "And when you do, make sure I make a lot of money, will you?"

Before Duwayne finished speaking, the three I.A. people came out of the Seagull. "Find what you were looking for?" Julian asked.

"Fuck you," the woman said, as the three of them walked off, empty-handed.

Julian got home two hours later and found Hope still waiting. Well, he had expected that. Their love-making sputtered out when he discovered that she was as fully integrated as Duwayne. Without the boost the undernet could give her, she hardly seemed interested. This had the advantage of making it easy for her to get over her annoyance, however. She managed to ask Julian how he could stand it, not being integrated? How did he know anything? "I listen. I see."

"I'd feel terribly alone."

"I like to be alone." And a few moments later, he was.

Sleep didn't come easily. Julian kept feeling that things had gotten out of control...that he had dropped a bomb. After all, Management periodically decided it was time to "clean up" Baikonur, and made punitive moves against Agon Systems' people. Given the lack of actual laws, Management's main weapon was to "redeploy" people to jobs which had minimal maintenance schedules. This was only effective against those who were in Population...but the lure of full maintenance caused a steady stream of applicants for integration. Julian and Duwayne and Ty would have to spend months re-redeploying them while the business of their business suffered. Which was exactly what Management wanted.

But until now Management had never actually sent out I.A. to take possession of records or property. Add that to Roy's reappearance in Julian's life, and the SteadiState burn...Julian wondered if Management wanted him off Mission.

People moved downstairs, of course. Julian and Roy's father, followed a few years later by their mother. The move had probably killed them both. Downstairs cultures continued to mutate, diverging from Mission's more and more every year. Even accepting full integration into the central nets didn't mean you would fit. Your scans would never match. You would have no real friends, no social set other than other exiles, and no skills that applied.

No, if Management wanted him off Mission, they would have to work a lot harder. To hell with Alpha Cen; he was trying to save his life.

Shortly after four-thirty in the morning he came awake — terrified. His room was absolutely black, something he'd never seen or imagined. And he was floating.

He tried to slow his breathing, to clear his mind. Spin was off; that was probably the initial lurch which woke him. Power, too, which meant that lights were off, and more importantly, so was the environmental control system.

No fans. No fresh air.

Well, he figured he wouldn't suffocate in the next few minutes. He had drifted to one of the Y-axis walls...he could feel the bed, which was

attached to the floor, below him at a right angle. Reaching to his left he found the door, and pulled himself through.

Julian experienced zero-G every time he moved from one node to the other, so the sensations were not new. The darkness and chaos were. In the main living volume he found light, and a door in what should have been the floor. He pushed himself toward it and managed to unlock it. He paused a moment before going out...partly to spatially orient himself...feet toward the street. Partly to wonder whether Hope had made it back to her Bike hotel — and if she had, whether that was a good idea. Partly to grab a headlamp from the emergency pack near the door. (He had to blow the dust off it, and the LED showed it would only be good for an hour or so.)

And where the hell was Duwayne?

In the quarter-light of the emergencies, the street was surprisingly crowded with people braced in doorways. More bodies that didn't show in Population. Julian didn't know any of them. Wrappers, chunks of fiber, and pieces of wall floated past, including one bearing the front half of an ancient tag — Alpha Cen, period. Alpha Cen sucks? Alpha Cen is heaven? Julian supposed it didn't make much difference.

He hauled himself over to the next doorway, where a heavy woman huddled with a little boy. The woman seemed stunned. "I think Mission's down," the boy said, looking worried. He was too young for integration, but now that Julian looked at the woman, the signs of withdrawal were clear. She didn't appear to be otherwise injured.

"What's your name?" he said.

She mouthed a reply: "Dolores." So she could hear. Yet she was frightened to death because the voices and pictures in her head had gone silent.

Julian turned to the boy. "What's your name?"

"Sam."

"Stay with your mother, Sam. Pretty soon they'll have power back on. Keep your feet on the street in case the spin comes on, too." Sam nodded as Julian pushed further down the street.

Suddenly something blotted out the emergency light above him. He looked up, and saw his upside down cart bumping gently against a sign that said "oftware." He pulled himself up to it, and found Duwayne flopping in the front seat. Tugging Duwayne around, he saw that he was

alive, but sobbing. "Hang on," he told him.

He knew he needed to get the cart righted and back on the street. Just being this high up, relative to the street, with a half-ton mass sitting next to him, made him nervous. He wished he had some of the people he'd worked with in the bays — for a whole year he had maneuvered containers like this all day long.

Bracing himself, he grabbed the rack over the rear battery and slowly began to turn the whole thing over. He had it halfway over when the main lights came on. He wanted to cheer. Of course, that also meant that the big air vents went back into operation, and he felt himself swaying in a sudden breeze.

Suddenly he knew he had to hurry. Power meant spin was also returning.

He tried to tell himself he didn't need to hurry...it would take minutes for rates to build up, for any real gravity to return. But there was a growing clatter of floating furniture, cookware, God knew what else, all colliding as air currents swept them together. He turned, rebraced, waited. Turned again, lost his grip, found it. Rebraced.

The cart was upright, and Duwayne was trying to get out. "Don't move!" Julian snapped. Too late: Duwayne's movements wrenched the cart out of Julian's grip. He floated one way while the cart went the other, both of them in a gentle tumble. The cart cracked into the building across the street while Julian bumped his head on the sky. Feeling somewhat more at home in near-G now, he pushed himself back toward the street.

He was just in time to see the cart settle slowly and gently on its right side as gravity returned. He bounced over and helped Duwayne climb out. "Let's straighten this out while we still can." Duwayne helped him right the cart, then stood there chattering as Julian looked it over for damage. One side panel had crumpled; the forward frame appeared bent. Julian hit the ignition, however, and heard the reassuring hum. "You and Ty did a good job on this," he told Duwayne. "What happened?"

Duwayne blinked. "It's hard to say. Mission's down. Undernet, too — " "I know."

"I think it was the SteadiState unit, something about a burnthrough that started the whole stack going asymmetrical." Julian remembered some disaster scenario from school long-ago, how carefully the dynamics

of the many moving parts of Mission needed to be kept in balance. A sudden burst of propulsion from an unexpected angle would be troublesome, possibly disastrous.

"That would explain loss of spin, but not the blackout, or the networks going down."

"All I meant was that was the last data I had. I've got nothing but static since then." He rubbed his eyes. "It's weird. Quiet." To Julian's ears, full of the growing drone of voices, vents, and occasional crashes, it was anything but quiet. "What should we do?"

Julian got behind the wheel of the cart. "Let's see if we can't fix something." As they drove off Julian saw a graffito remnant: no Alpha Cen, no linking symbol, just "Death."

THE BOTTLE that was Mission architecture was in fact several different structures that, as the joke had it, only happened to be in the same place at the same time.

The neck of the bottle was the propulsion tower; the body was made up of six different flattened, cylindrical sections that spun independently, linked only by their common core. Node Baikonur, with its high bays and core docking ports was at the end opposite the propulsion tower. The flight operations center was in Node Korou, the one closest.

Julian and Duwayne drove to the main lift, rode it to the core, then locked the car's wheels into the mag strip, moving x-ward behind a couple of maintenance vehicles taking the injured to Node Korou. An I.A. cop had made the first step toward harrasing them, some complaint about the mag strips being for emergency use only, but shut up when he saw the driver was Julian. It struck Julian for the first time that if he actually went back to Management he would have to give up the cart.

"I wish I knew where we were going," Duwayne complained.

"Still no nets?"

"Nothing. How can you navigate?"

"I'm using instinct." Not that it was working for him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in Node Korou — probably back before the divorce. He had always visualized it as low sky, unfinished. Either his memory was faulty or there had been changes in twenty years: even allowing for the disruption caused by the spinquake, Korou was posh.

Some clever Facilities designer had taken three levels and turned them into one by ripping out the sky in a couple of places. They probably had weather here. The street was some kind of redbrick or cobblestone, not the comp you found everywhere else. Real stores with genuine windows — goods scattered all over. The people on the street surveying the damage had the well-maintained look of Management, but moved like puppets. They were jerky, stiff, dazed by being alone in their own heads for the first time in years. The fact that the lights kept flickering as power levels changed, and that suddenly frigid breezes blasted down the streets, only made it worse.

Julian and Duwayne turned a corner and found themselves in front of a three-story palace. "What's *this*?" Duwayne asked.

"Flight operations center," Julian told him.

Like any good palace, the ops center had guards. They were clearly jumpy at being cut off from the security categories of Mission, and thus more subject to intimidation. When Julian realized it would be impossible to get a message sent inside to Roy, he and Duwayne simply told the guard they would find Roy themselves, and walked right in.

The interior of flight operations had once been quite grand, especially on Mission's limited scale. There had been a genuine glass chandelier hanging over the lobby. Julian remembered vaguely that it had come from the original Mir control center in Russia. Thanks to the spinquake, alas, it was a pile of sparkly shapes on the lobby floor.

Down one of the corridors they found Roy being tended by a young, confused female staffer. Roy had a cut over one eye which had been bandaged, but was still bleeding. "You're beginning to look your age," Julian told him.

"If it's any consolation, I feel considerably older."

"Have you spoken to Hannah? Is she all right?"

He nodded. "She's still working analysis." He seemed to focus on Julian and Duwayne for the first time. "I can't believe you showed up here."

"We came to see if we could help," Julian said, surprising himself.

"How nice of you...considering that you caused this." Before Julian could protest, Roy added, "Diagnostics found that it was an Agon Systems virus that destroyed all Mission nets. They're history. And so is Mission."

Julian would rather have been plunged back into his lightless, weightless, airless room than hear that. "That's not possible. The virus was supposed to self-destruct."

"The system crashed before it did its job. I've been watching them try to bring things back up...there's nothing there, Julian. No environmental controls, no financial records, no nothing."

"You've got to have backups. What about Management downstairs?"

"Well, almost everything exists in another form somewhere. But it's not integrated and it's not accessible. There's no way to run Mission right now."

Julian glanced at Duwayne to see if he'd heard, or, if he'd understood. Not a clue. The guards worried him, however. So did Roy's continued bleeding.

"There's nothing anyone can do without the nets." Julian nodded to Duwayne, who helped Roy to his feet. They headed for the cart. "We need to get you out of here."

Seeing again the physical results of the event depressed Julian. Until Roy suggested it, he had not linked the spinquake to the virus he had launched in anger. If all the wreckage and injuries were truly his fault, he would deserve whatever punishment he received. But he wasn't prepared to accept that. "One virus shouldn't be able to bring down a whole network," he told Roy twenty minutes later, once they had reached Node Canaveral maintenance. The windows had been blown out, but there was power. One of the techs quickly stitched up Roy's scalp, then moved on to the next patient, leaving Roy alone with Julian.

"It didn't," Roy said. "We had giant system problems of our own. Your virus was like striking a match in a room full of gasoline."

"You mean the SteadiState hardware worked?"

"Yeah. We had a containment problem, but it wasn't the hardware's fault. It's a good engine and we could actually launch Mission with it, though nobody in Munich will ever believe it."

"That's a shame."

Roy looked at him over his enzyme drink. "What do you care?" Before Julian could object, Roy went on. "You've always hated the whole idea of going to Alpha Cen. You chose to work on the docks and get in with the

Agon crowd. Well, you made the right choice, Julian. The way things are going now, you have more power to keep Mission alive than I do."

Duwayne suddenly came over. His face looked like the dawn. "Undernet's back on line," he said to Julian. "Our people are checking in. Most of them seem to be fine." A pause. "The line is three to two that Management abandons Mission and sends us all downstairs."

Julian looked from Duwayne to Roy, then back again, and knew that at least he was safe from Management harrassment. They were going to be too busy cleaning up their mess.

But did he want Mission to die? It wasn't likely Management would dismantle the place even if it did abandon the ExtraSolar goal; Mission had essentially been used as a space station for decades, anyway. Just figuring out which partner in Management was entitled to which chunk of this pretty Node Korou cobblestone would take the rest of the century. No, Mission would continue to be home.

But what kind of home? The one lesson Julian had learned in all his business dealings was that people needed goals. For some it was money, for some it was sex. For some it was volume. But there was always a goal. "Duwayne," he said. "Can you tell Ty to get up here? And tell him to bring every body he can find. People who aren't integrated, some of the techs from the bay."

"If you're sure that's what you want..." Duwayne looked doubtful.

He wasn't in any mood for Duwayne's second thoughts, so he just looked at him. Duwayne tripped over a fallen chair as he hustled back to the cart.

Roy said, "What are you trying to do?"

"Fill a vaccuum, I think."

Roy stood up, his face flushed. When Julian was eight he had accidentally erased Roy's *Magic City*, one he had spent four months building. Eleven-year-old Roy had hit Julian in the mouth; now he looked as though he was about to do the same thing. But forty-year-old Roy Tallet, Level C manager, was not about to get violent. He knew it would show up on his scans and bring a maintenance penalty. "You'll never get away with it."

"Get yourself on the undernet and make a bet."

It was a week before Julian could again take up his place at the Seagull, and even as he sat with Duwayne and Ty, he realized it was not the same.

The Seagull had been hard hit by the one-two punch of the I.A. visit and the spinquaque; its windows were gone and panelling was missing.

Business was still not back to normal. Well, it would never be what it was before the burnthrough. Management was still trying to bring up the new Mission net, but already the undernet had gotten several hundred new subscribers. Some of them wanted what the undernet had to offer — sex, gambling, pharmaceuticals — but just as many couldn't be tempted. They wanted secure volume. They wanted food. They wanted to go to Alpha Cen.

Dealing with it all required endless facing. At one point, Duwayne had grown impatient, getting up and walking away. Even loyal Ty spoke up. "Mr. Tallet, why don't you get yourself integrated? It'd make everything so much easier."

Julian glared and Ty changed the subject. A few moments later Duwayne came back. "Visitor," was all he said. The visitor was Roy, looking much better than the last time they had met.

"Sit down."

"I can't stay long. I'm just delivering a message." Roy glanced at Duwayne, who took the hint and got out of the booth as Roy slid in. "Riordan wants to face."

"The phones are working."

"He wanted me to prep you. He's going to offer you a job."

"I've got a job."

"A job in Management, Level C."

A job in Level C. The idea was so ridiculous that Julian didn't have a prepared reason for rejection. "I thought it was against the rules for the two of us to be there."

Roy smiled faintly. "You know, I had scheduled myself in maintenance deliberately to see you again."

"Why?"

"I was actually going to warn you about the moves against all of Agon Systems'...sidelines."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"You were being an asshole. And so was I." Roy sighed. "We just finished a new study and that showed seventy percent of Mission pop logged onto the undernet at any given time. Half of them were manage-

ment. Usage was higher than it was for Mission. It shocked everyone on C, believe me. You've got to remember, Management started out as a bunch of engineers. For fifty years they've been trying to build a whole goddamn world — not just the hardware, but right down to deciding what was right to eat and drink and do. It didn't work. It was never going to work. It was about as useful as voting that two and two equal five.

"I wanted to warn you. I thought they were making a mistake, trying to fight you. I mean, if you weren't running those activities...someone else would. I said for years we should use you. But when I saw you — " He opened his hands.

"We acted like kids." Julian leaned back and examined his pencil. Management. Responsibility. "What are you and Hannah going to do?"

"We're moving downstairs, to Munich — " He wouldn't let Julian interrupt. "No, I'll be fine. I've been scanned and integrated all along. Hannah's been dying to go home." He smiled. "I'd invite you to visit, but I expect you'll be unreachable."

"You think we can actually go trans-Alpha?"

"The SteadiState works. If everyone starts pulling in the same direction, Mission could be on its way within the year."

On its way to Alpha Cen. "Well, then, I'd better see Riordan." Roy remained seated, silent. "What's wrong?"

Roy looked up. "I feel as if I got my brother back, and now I'm losing him." Julian realized he had been feeling the same thing.

By habit, Duwayne followed Julian and Roy outside. As Julian watched his brother go, he realized he was going to have to start a family. Who with? Sophie? Hope? Somebody.

"Duwayne," he said. "Get me into Node Canaveral maintenance. Set up my integration." Duwayne grinned and went to work.

Julian remained alone, noting the layer of dust on the wall, fighting back a sneeze. An idea occurred to him, and he reached out and scratched a new bit of graffiti in the dust: Alpha Cen = Life.

He didn't expect to walk the shores of Eden, but with a little luck he would have grandchildren, and *they* would.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Angel, by Garry D. Kilworth,
Tor Books, 1996, 320pp, \$22.95,
Hardcover

CHRISTIAN mythology usually gets short shrift in fantasy and horror novels. Oh, we see plenty of Satan and demons and the like, but we don't often see the influence of their opposites except for the crucifixes in vampire stories and Christ's name scaring off the denizens of faerie. Which seems rather odd, because if one is willing to fictionally accept the existence of the devil, then why are God and the angels precluded? It can't be because the mythology of heaven doesn't have resonance or plot potential. Considering the wrath of God and the retributions dealt by his angels as depicted in the Scriptures, one would think that there would be the possibility for any number of stories using this material.

Neither side is ignored in Garry Kilworth's *Angel*. There are de-

mons, yes, hiding in our world to escape an endless heavenly conflict, but they aren't nearly as frightening as the angel in pursuit of them. The angel has taken it upon itself to cleanse our world of these creatures, burning them in heavenly fire. Unfortunately, these fires are incredibly intense and tend to consume hundreds of human beings and all sorts of property along with the demons. The angel, so focused on its task, pays scant attention to this. Human lifespans are so short, and heaven awaits the good, so what harm is there in speeding them along their way?

San Francisco Detective Dave Peters doesn't see it that way. Long before the personal loss he suffers at the hands of the angel, he and his partner Danny Spitz are investigating the epidemic of arson that has overtaken their city, determined to put a stop to it. Many of the fires are caused by the angel, but in the wake of the angel's work come the copycats so that every day there is a major fire in the city. And it's not

only in San Francisco. This is happening all over the world.

When the policemen finally realize what they're up against, they also realize the hopelessness of their task. Who can they turn to? Who will believe them? How do you even stop an angel? Report his activities to his superiors, they're told at one point by one of the demons. But what do you do when God doesn't seem to be listening?

The prose of *Angel* is a little workmanlike at times, but the characters and their moral dilemma is fascinating. It's also refreshing to have a character such as Danny Spitz, a fervent Catholic, appear in a fantasy novel and not be either dismissed or mocked for his beliefs. Far too many books presuppose that it's fine to have characters believe in elves, say, or earth spirits, but not any of the world's organized religions, as though the latter have no place in spiritual or paranormal discussions, except in a negative sense.

For open-minded readers, the questions Kilworth poses concerning angels, demons, free will and the like will be captivating, no matter what their religious background or beliefs, or lack thereof. When you add in the book's fast-paced and suspense, *Angel* comes up a real winner.

Into the Deep, by Ken Grimwood, Onyx, 1996, 380pp, \$5.99, Mass market

From Margaret St. Clair and Thomas Burnett Swann to the book in hand, there's been a long tradition of authors concerning themselves with the possibilities of cetacean intelligence. Not simply that dolphins and their kin are intelligent animals, but that their intelligence is on a level to our own, perhaps higher than ours. The reason we haven't communicated with each other yet, is that we (the humans) simply don't understand them. We expect them to communicate in a manner similar to how we communicate with other humans, and since they don't, we've pretty much dismissed them.

A case can be made for it, I'd say. Corvid, simian, cetacean... there's something in the eyes that speaks of more than simple behavioral patterns and mimicry. And perhaps the anthropomorphizing we do with our pet dogs and cats isn't such a fantasy after all. But this isn't really the place to argue that consideration, one that many people might consider as much a fantasy as the latest Tolkien spin-off.

Ken Grimwood isn't really a fantasy writer. For all his World

Fantasy Award a few years ago for *Replay*, in *Into the Deep* he takes a more scientific approach. Or at least a speculative approach based on science. One of his principle characters, Sheila Roberts, is a researcher specializing in dolphin intelligence trying to find hard evidence that perhaps dolphins communicate with each other by pictures — a method that our brains aren't wired to deal with. Using a computer, she's desperately trying to prove her point before her research grant runs out.

At the same time, a reporter is brought face-to-face with the horrors of dolphins dying in the nets of tuna fishermen, a captain of one of those boats is beginning to have second thoughts about the morality of what he is doing, a mining engineer is drilling off the coast of California with an experimental laser that might be cutting through to a volcano....

In other words, there's a lot going on, all of it of interest, well-written and enthralling, so when I realized that Grimwood was also going to tell part of his story from the dolphins' point of view, I found myself cringing a little, worrying that it would all be just too twee.

I should have realized that the author of *Replay* wouldn't let me down. Gripping as all the real-world

elements are, the sections with the dolphins proved more fascinating still, allowing Grimwood to give us a novel that's spiritually resonant as much as it's a thriller. He touches on concerns that affect us all, and therefore should concern us all: Not simply the rapacious way we take on our environment, but the level of disrespect too many of us have for those with whom we share the planet.

Unfortunately, Grimwood's probably preaching to the converted, but that doesn't stop this from being a wonderful book.

The Woman Who Lives in the Earth, by Swain Wolfe, Harper Collins, 1996, 171pp, \$18.00, Hardcover

A few columns ago I wrote about William Browning Spencer's *Zod Wallop*, how, for all its differences, it was the first book to give me the same buzz I got while reading Jonathan Carroll's *Land of Laughs*. It was something I hadn't expected to experience again because Carroll's voice is so much his own, and yet Spencer pulled it off — recreating a mood for me, but still very much retaining his own individual voice, telling his own unique story.

This time out the touchstone


is Patricia McKillip, particularly her utterly charming novel, *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*. Like the best of McKillip's work, Swain Wolfe's *The Woman Who lives in the Earth* weaves mythic threads into common lives. He tells his story in simple, but never simplistic style, his prose resonating with a deft and heartfelt honesty that owes as much to poetry as to the straightforward storytelling style of, say, a Hemingway.

His protagonist is Sarah, a young girl living in a land troubled by a long, devastating draught. Sarah's curiosity and open heart make her different enough from the local villagers that they — as we always seem to do in troubled times — settle upon her as a scapegoat for their current hard times. So part of the story deals with how the villagers, led by the turbaned Lizard Woman, set upon this "demon child" and plan to burn her to save themselves, and part of the book deals with Sarah's journey of self-discovery that eventually leads her to the title character, a powerful and dangerous earth spirit who lives in the earth.

It's hard to say when the book is set — long before the Industrial Age, or long after — but it doesn't really matter. Wolfe's story is timeless, for all that it is placed so firmly

into its own setting and background. The dying land, the wonderful cast of characters, the village and the farm of Sarah's parents, Sarah's visionary journey and the common day-to-day elements of life in Wolfe's world are all delineated with just the right amount of detail to bring them to life in our heads as we read. His message is ultimately one of hope, but *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* is only secondarily a cautionary tale. First and foremost it is Sarah's story, enchantingly told and beautifully realized.

A closer scrutiny of the book's title page shows that the novel was originally published in 1993 by Stone Creek Press. One assumes Stone Creek is a small press and I for one am grateful to HarperCollins for reprinting the book in such a lovely edition so that it can now reach the wider market it deserves. I take the risk of putting you off with what might seem like excessive praise for this book, but I do so in the hope that my enthusiasm will have you trying it for yourself. And once you've read it, I don't doubt you'll be pressing it into the hands of your favorite people as well.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. 



GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

Point of Hopes, by Melissa Scott & Lisa Barnett, Tor, \$23.95.

THERE ARE two problems with reading this book late at night

— which is when I have most of my quiet reading time. The first is that it's dense with detail — and most of that detail is contextual, not explained; I read the prologue twice, trying to remember titles, and words, and the relation between the two. The second is that, once you've straightened out the previous problem, you go to bed a lot later than you thought you would when you picked up the book to relax for a minute. A lot later.

Point of Hopes is one of several "Points," which is this world's word for police station. Nicholas Rathe is one of its "pointsmen" — a man who is called to keep the law and the peace. The job is a new one, and many of the merchants and citizens who call upon the services of a

pointsmen think of the points as a cut above a protection racket — but men like Rathe are slowly changing their opinion with their dedication to honest labor — even if honesty is not always appreciated and not always trusted.

This is a wonderfully realized world — and because of that, often a grim one, where crime and bribery and, well, dirt, are always on the periphery of a reader's senses. The politics of personality and power feel real, as do the bigoted reactions of people who cannot quite control their honest fears. And those fears revolve around the disappearance of over eighty of the city's children.

I like the way Scott and Barnett handle character. In the opening chapter, as the story starts rolling, Nicholas Rathe meets a belligerent, overweight man who looks like a grim apprentice-beater. Surprisingly enough, he's come to report a "missing" apprentice. Rathe is about to write off the complaint — who wouldn't run away from a man

like this? — when he realizes that this man belongs to a guild that has prestige in the city — prestige enough that worse than an occasional beating would be required to drive an apprentice to run away. Armed with Rathe's opinion of the man, we follow him to his shop — and there discover, by the reactions of the people that he lives and works with, that Rathe's opinion, hastily and honestly drawn, is wrong. We can no more judge a man by his appearance than we can a book by its cover — but we do both. I like to be gently reminded of this on occasion.

Philip Eslingen is a man that Rathe is equally quick to judge — but this judgment, one of trust and measured respect, is not so mistaken, and between the two, pointsman and foreign mercenary, the plot unfolds all over the place. I read this book in a sitting, got to sleep at 4:30 in the morning, and got through the day bearing the authors no resentment whatever at the lack of sleep — which, in a house with a two-and-a-half-year-old who wants to drown the phone, is no small achievement.

Or: I really really really liked this book.

While reading for this column, I found out that Sergei Grinkov, a

twenty-eight-year-old two-time Olympic gold-medalist, had died during a skating practice with his wife and professional partner, Ekaterina Gordeeva. They were the epitome of perfection in their chosen sport, and whether or not the media fairy-tale surrounding their personal lives was true (and I've never heard a word to suggest otherwise, but I can be a tad cynical at times), they were for me a symbol both of beauty and the march of time. It seemed unfair to me that no matter what they did, time would take from them the skills that they had spent their lives honing and perfecting — and time would take from us that perfect moment, when the music played, and the world became these two, skating for each other while the world was privileged to watch. I never thought that the time they did have would be cut short by his death. They were strangers to me, not friends, but I grieved anyway.

Now, what does this have to do with reading?

I turned, naturally, to the guilty pleasure that is often called comfort reading: I wanted to find a space in which to forget that everything has an end, and that that ending can be — and often is — profoundly unjust. And as I picked up any num-

ber of sure-fire comfort books, I discovered something about the books *I* read for comfort.

There seem to be two types of comfort books in the piles beside my computer. The first takes a plain-Jane (or John) protagonist with quirks and hidden potential. All of the people she meets are faulty; they're not sympathetic enough, they aren't understanding enough, they're selfish, they're cruel. The world, in these books, is a Terrible Place until our Unfortunate Hero finds the person who will truly appreciate them, understand them, and yes, love them. I am perhaps being unkind, and I will say that in my earlier years I found much about these books that was soothing and helpful when my ego was feeling particularly bruised.

The second type of comfort book draws upon many of the same tropes; it takes a plain-Jane (or John) character, but instead of placing them in the pit of an uncaring and cruel world, it places them in a merely dangerous one. Yes, there are cruel individuals, but not all of the world is peopled by them, and indeed, the young protagonist will make more than one friend, and will truly grow and change by book's end. As you might have guessed, I want books of this second type.

Given some of the complaints leveled at the genre in general, one would think that there would be thousands upon thousands of books that pandered to comfort readers such as me who aren't, for whatever reason, looking for a challenge. Surprise, surprise.

First: The good news.

Project Farcry, by Pauline Ashwell, Tor, \$23.95.

John James Jordan is a man who lives for space expeditions. He's made a name for himself, and has even — briefly — managed to stay Earthbound long enough to get married. He's also had the honor of being one of the first men divorced while in space — and being an absentee father, although he can be forgiven for this because until his son, Richard, was two, he had no idea he existed.

But John James Jordan and Richard Jordan are about to meet because the elder Jordan is jolted into taking an interest in the son that he was politely requested to stay away from: his mother doesn't really want him around anymore.

I don't think it's giving much away to say that the younger Jordan is a telepath — in a world where telepaths "hear" the unspoken

words just as if they were spoken out loud. You can probably guess what havoc that wreaks in his life — and you almost have to, because Ashwell doesn't dwell on his misery. However, the little scene when father and son first meet is charming, touching — it has *heart*, which takes the edge of predictability out of the equation. Who cares if you know what's going to happen? By the end of the scene, it's exactly what you want and hope for.

Richard Jordan becomes the Boy Who Went To Space, and in the process, he discovers a sentient, alien race which is nearing extinction, makes an important friend, and learns to accept his gift. He also witnesses the disappearance of a world — and an important mentor — in an experimental project. As a witness and a young man, he's got to do *something*. He's got the gift, and he can speak with the People — but what *else* can he do with it? What's it for? Well...telepathy isn't impeded by distance. And every other form of communication between traveling ships and Earth is.

Ashwell writes about Richard at a variety of ages, essentially stringing together novellas and novelettes and weaving them into a whole that is not quite seamless. I wanted to know more about Rich-

ard, and so much of his life is off-screen that I was a little bit jarred between a couple of the transitions.

But that shouldn't matter. This is science fiction that is charming, gentle, and old-fashioned in the best possible sense of the word.

Myst: The Book of Atrus, by Rand & Robin Miller with David Wingrove, Hyperion, \$22.95.

I was one of the millions who bought both *Myst* and *Seventh Guest*, two of the multimedia CD-ROM-only games that started the avalanche toward that medium. *Myst* was the superior game because the Millers understood how to structure their game to get the best possible suspension of disbelief from a player. Their sparse use of video clips, the use of books that had to be studied for clues, the lack of a standard video game interface — or inventory system — all of these built that fragile but necessary sense of otherworldliness that carried the whole.

To do this in a game is very hard, and I was really looking forward to the novel. Unfortunately, while the Millers understand the structure of the multimedia environment arguably better than anyone, they don't understand the

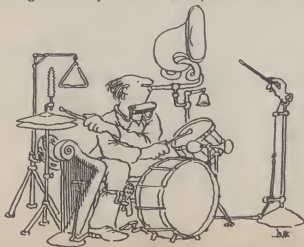
structure of a novel as well. Wingrove does, although it's not clear what his role in the book itself was.

What starts out in such a promising fashion — with a young man's loss of a beloved wife due to the difficult birth of a child, and his subsequent angry departure from his mother's side — flattens out into the two-dimensional images that evoked so much in the game. The protagonist of the book is a young man who, long after his abandonment, is found by his father, who promises to teach him the Art. One of the basic premises of *Myst* — and the *Book of Atrus* — is that an art exists by which a creator can literally make a world by writing it down in a special book. Editing, deleting, rewriting — these change the premise and the shape of the world within.

This begs the comparison be-

tween the characters' Power and the power of *Myst: The Book of Atrus*, which is unfortunate, as the novel does not bear the weight of that comparison well.

In what is the pivotal scene in the book, the young protagonist confronts his father — who has set himself up as a god on the worlds of his creation — and the father replies to the young man's criticisms by — literally — editing a work that he doesn't understand the heart of. The argument — that of empty style and craft versus an intuitive, creative talent — is an old one, and well worth having. Unfortunately, the young man, Atrus, is supposed to have that heart, and that vision — and the novel itself never brings it to life, which robs Atrus of any true strength and leaves one with a sense that if Atrus indeed wins the argument, it's a very pyrrhic victory for the reader. ♪





BRIEF REVIEWS: BOOKS

Expiration Date, by Tim Powers, Tor, January 1996, \$23.95, Hardcover.

WHAT USE IS an old ghost? Plenty, if you know how to snort it properly. But if you're Kootie Parganis, an eleven-year-old kid with a haunt he can't shake, ghosts are just a big pain, an even worse affliction than a silly name. Pete Sullivan has a bigger problem: he just might become a ghost himself if he's not careful. Half the other characters in this novel are ghosts already, just trying to get by under difficult circumstances. Trouble is, Halloween is fast approaching, and this year a new power has come to rattle the social order in spectral Los Angeles.

Don't wait for Halloween to read this one. Buy it now. Devour it. Inhale it.

One Mind's Eye, by Kathy Tyers, Bantam Spectra, May 1996, 387pp, \$5.99, Mass market.

The central theme of *One Mind's Eye* is control. Political con-

trol of an eight-planet consortium of colony worlds. A mother's emotional control over her daughter. The delicate mental control required of telepaths in a society that fears them. And the desperate search for means to control a race of parasitic aliens who invade even deeper than telepaths into the minds of their human hosts. Tyers deftly weaves these separate elements into a fast-moving tale of dominance, independence, and personal responsibility that will leave the reader thinking about it long after turning the last page. Highly recommended.

None So Blind, by Joe Haldeman, AvonNova, May 1996, 304pp, \$22.00, Hardcover.

Joe Haldeman's newest book is a collection of his most recent short fiction. The collection includes such gems as "Feedback," "DX," and "Passages." It also includes award winners "The Hemingway Hoax," "None So Blind," and "Graves" (which first appeared in this magazine).

Haldeman's strength is stunning science fiction with an ethical center. He has an uncanny ability

to portray any sort of character as sympathetic, and yet show how monstrous human beings can be. The stories here show a writer at the top of his form; the accompanying essays are an insight into the writing process.

Highly recommended.

The 37th Mandala, by Marc Laidlaw, St. Martin's Press, February 1996, 352pp, \$23.95, Hardcover.

This eerie, challenging, and compelling book gets off to a slow start, then gathers momentum and rockets to an explosive finish.

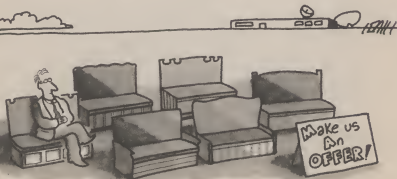
In *The 37th Mandala*, Laidlaw posits astral creatures that have

evolved to feed on human misery and despair. These mandalas shape human ends to their own disgusting needs and desires.

The book opens with a distancing bit of unclear backstory, then focuses on characters who are more engaging: Derek Crowe, a hack New Age writer, who has just found success with a book about the "benevolent" mandalas; Michael, a young, confused magic practitioner; his girlfriend Lenore, a strong but directionless woman.

Laidlaw's prose is elegant and evocative, even when the details are grimy. His characterization is superb. His ideas are disturbing. Recommended. ♣

Any advanced civilization
will recognize a good sofa sale.



Nasa's Settee Program

While Michael Bishop's novel, *Brittle Innings*, was getting critical raves, Michael renewed his love affair with short fiction. In the last two years, he has published stories in *Crank!*, *Asimov's*, *Science Fiction Age*, and *Century*, with more forthcoming (including another for this magazine).

About "Three Dreams in the Wake of a Death," he writes, "The story grew out of a dream. I won't tell you which of the story's three parts reproduces my real dream or which two parts are attempts to create credible dream imagery." It doesn't matter: "Three Dreams..." is a powerful evocation of the father-son relationship.

Three Dreams in the Wake of a Death

By Michael Bishop

i. provocation

TOWARD MORNING LAWSON had a dream. He saw both his late father and himself, as a grown man, standing on the paved edge of a large

natural pool. At their backs mingled and chatted a great many anonymous partygoers, all of them energized by the mild sunshine, a few making preparations for a cookout. Lawson paid them no heed, but stared down into the glassy waters. As if he had an underwater as well as a poolside vantage, he saw a Labrador retriever — the very dog his father had owned when Lawson was a boy — swimming like a robust black otter. This creature from Lawson's childhood moved sinuously, playfully, through the water, then rocketed upward from the moss-furred bottom to catch in its jaws a large white fish, a kind of plump albino bass.

At this point, Lawson's dream skipped several frames. He had the impression that the dog made several catches in a row, exited the pool without shaking, and carried each lovely white bass to the self-appointed cooks at the deep-frying vats behind him. Lawson focused, though, on the

dog's hypnotic underwater swimming, which came to an end — dissolving into another frame altogether — when an alligator more than twice the retriever's length appeared in the water, immediately prompting the dog to climb out.

The alligator also climbed out. The dog vanished, either into the crowd or into thin air, while the partygoers went on about their merry-making with no evident alarm. In fact, Lawson and his father stood calmly on the pool's margin watching the alligator emerge. As it began to elbow-walk over the pavement, Lawson thought, This is a dangerous creature, its jaws can snap like metal traps, every person here is a potential victim of its appetite. That no one displayed the least sign of panic struck him as remarkable; indeed, as crazy. Lawson's father had enough sense to view the alligator's presence as a bizarre intrusion, conceivably even as a threat. Instead of warning people away, though, he turned to Lawson and said, I'm going to kick him in the butt, a macho boast so typical of his dad in life that Lawson could only gape, even though he wanted to say, That's stupid, or Dad, you'll put everyone here at risk, or How can you kick an alligator in the butt?

How could you? The snout-up, elbow-walking reptile had a long, wide, flat, leathery, ridged tail that hid and protected its anus. Did this tail, in his father's eyes, qualify as its butt? Lawson had no idea. His father seemed too miffed by the alligator's party-crashing to care. He sidled up to it and booted it in a portion of tail behind one squat hind leg. The alligator leapt an inch or two on its front legs and swiveled its jaws. Lawson's father skipped aside.

Horried, Lawson looked on as the alligator, deprived of any chance to avenge itself on his father, swerved and scooted after the crowd near the metal cookers. There, just before awakening, he saw it seize the leg of a nine- or ten-year-old girl.

ii. shame

A few days later, Lawson had slept for less than two hours when he dreamt again. His father appeared as a handsome thirty-five-year-old man, he as a nine- or ten-year-old boy. His chief private worry back then had been the obliteration of the planet, and of course himself, in a ponderous

ballet of mushroom clouds. This worry discolored every frame of his dream.

In the weeds along the bank of a small river, Lawson and his father, barefoot, found a dented metal boat. As his dad's Labrador retriever went foraging among the cattails for muskrat or jackrabbit, they pushed this boat into the muddy water and jumped aboard.

Let's go musselling, Lawson's father said. He skinned out of his shirt, his shorts, his rumpled military boxers.

Lawson also shed his clothes, but more slowly: he had fewer muscles — mussels? — than his dad and a tiny pale sex, like a pleated grub. His father laughed, not unkindly, then grabbed a rusted bucket from the prow and dove into the rippling surrounding brownness.

From the bottom of the river, his father began to lift bucket after bucket of ugly purplish mussels, sluice them clean of muck, and dump them into the boat. Arkansas oysters, he said, laughing. Amazingly, he was standing on the grainy bottom silt: tepid water lapped him at breastbone height. Although he wanted Lawson to dive in too, Lawson ducked his head and clung to the gunwales. His father's naked muscles spooked him, as did the shells mounding at his feet like brittle mutant poker chips.

Whyre we doin this? he asked.

Bivalve meat for Grampa Cody's razorbacks, said his dad. Might even find a pearl or two.

No pearls in thesere ugly things. He kicked at them.

Mebbe not. But with just one, we could scoot up to Alaska and homestead us a place. Get in, his father said. You'll blister up there.

Lawson's boyhood self refused to budge.

Awright then. His father tossed the bucket toward the bank. Tumbling, it became a strange woman's head, with bright red lips and fluttering blond eyelashes. Lawson felt relief when it disappeared among the cattails. Immediately, his father did a kipping sort of dive, his buttocks glinting in the sun and vanishing into the leathery water. Anxiety consumed Lawson. Also, the spray showering back on him burned like the fallout from a welding torch.

Meanwhile, his father swam relentlessly down. Lawson's boyhood self could see him as if from an underwater vantage: the deeper his father went the clearer the water became, until at last it had the cold and

mysterious dimensions of a cave lake. Lawson watched as his father circled down to an antique pub table at which sat three laughing women in gowns of seaweed and organdy. None of these mermaids was either his mother or the divorced Scotswoman with whom his father had recently set up housekeeping in Cheyenne.

In the boat, Lawson's boyhood self got up, balanced arms akimbo on the middle seat, and peed in a hissing parabola into the water.

iii. confluence

A week or so later, at approximately 3:30 A.M., Lawson had another dream. This time his father — generally a graceful man only when swimming or diving — hustled through a vast tiled catacomb: subway station, public lavatory, or maybe even the basement of some kind of government building. Carrying his paunch like a small pregnancy, he hurried past turnstiles, or sink basins, or filing cabinets, sometimes looking behind him and continuously muttering. The muttering seemed more amused than outraged. Even so, Lawson knew that his father was trying to escape a band of determined pursuers.

Lawson understood that he was one of the pursuers. A Labrador retriever — the very dog his father had owned when Lawson was boy — tugged him through the echoing spaces on its choke-chain. The dog barked only at intervals and then from deep within the ebony vault of its chest. At each bark, the catacomb rang as if from a pistol shot. Lawson could hardly keep up with the dog. He could hear the other pursuers, who nonetheless remained distant and unseen. Surveillance cameras, he believed, were taping the entire hunt.

Lawson's father ran up a descending escalator and vanished over its lip. The black dog pulled Lawson up the escalator after him, and Lawson watched his father climb a concrete slope toward an immense granite tower. This tower — a carving rather than a true building, despite Lawson's first impression of it — dominated the barren cityscape. From its battlements, through its widest crenels, poured a waterfall. These streams braided into a clattering veil that billowed up at street level with neither spray nor runoff. Lawson's father stepped through the waterfall and remained behind it, imprisoned.

Dad! Lawson yelled.

The black dog yanked free of him, sprinted to the tower, and likewise jumped through the waterfall. Lawson hitched up the slope after it, a sudden searing pain in one knee. When he was close enough to part the water with his hand, he saw his father's fractured image in the roaring backboil.

Come on in, son! Water's fine!

I can't! Lawson cried.

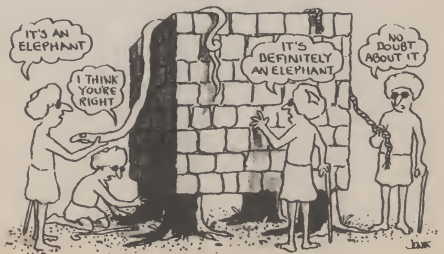
Then they'll get you too! his father said. Take ol Sonny's word for it!

Lawson knew that their pursuers would soon emerge from the catacomb. They would see Lawson standing there and surmise his father's nearness, then shove Lawson aside and reach through the water to seize his father. Lawson's knee ached. The ache had a stabbing counterpart in his chest.

Come on! his father mouthed. Grinning, feinting, he boxed the falling water like a punching bag.

Lawson glanced down. The shimmering fabric of his shirt had begun to rain; it melted and ran in self-recycling threads, a tunic of rains. Clad in this shirt, he stepped quite easily through the waterfall.

A barking dog awoke Lawson, but he couldn't find it from his window: nothing visible but drizzle slanting down in a streetlamp's halo. ¶



Including stories, essays, book and film columns, contest entries and the occasional cameo, this is Harlan Ellison's 94th appearance in these pages. (Eclipsed only by Isaac Asimov and a trio of cover artists, Harlan has been our most frequent contributor.) His first publication here was back in August of 1962 — the late Avram Davidson was then editor — and the story was the brief fantasy "Paulie Charmed the Sleeping Woman." The first time an Ellison story sparked interpretation as an F&SF cover was in January, 1969, when Gahan Wilson did an hilarious painting for "Santa Clause vs. S.P.I.D.E.R." under the auspices of then-editor Edward L. Ferman.

Harlan's current offering is a story of revenge on such a grand scale, of such gigantic proportion and intensity, that it makes mere human vengeance seem no more than adolescent pique. This story has already won itself a place on the final ballots for three major fantasy awards this year. It was written around a pre-existing painting for the 5th issue of the ongoing Dark Horse comic, Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor, and we wanted to make sure you didn't miss this memorable tale of young lust and ancient grievance.

Chatting with Anubis

By Harlan Ellison

WHEN THE CORE DRILLING was halted at a depth of exactly 804.5 meters, one half mile down, Amy Guiterman and I conspired to grab

Immortality by the throat and shake it till it noticed us.

My name is Wang Zicai. Ordinarily, the family name Wang — which is pronounced with the "a" in *father*, almost as if it were Wong — means "king." In my case, it means something else; it means "rushing headlong." How appropriate. Don't tell me clairvoyance doesn't run in my family...Zicai means "suicide." Half a mile down, beneath the blank Sahara, in a hidden valley that holds cupped in its eternal serenity the lake of the oasis of Siwa, I and a young woman equally as young and reckless

as myself, Amy Guiterman of New York City, conspired to do a thing that would certainly cause our disgrace, if not our separate deaths.

I am writing this in Yin.

It is the lost ancestral language of the Chinese people. It was a language written between the 18th and 12th centuries before the common era. It is not only ancient, it is impossible to translate. There are only five people alive today, as I write this, who can translate this manuscript, written in the language of the Yin Dynasty that blossomed northeast along the Yellow River in a time long before the son of a carpenter is alleged to have fed multitudes with loaves and fishes, to have walked on water, to have raised the dead. I am no "rice christian." You cannot give me a meal and find me scurrying to your god. I am Buddhist, as my family has been for centuries. That I can write in Yin — which is to modern Chinese as classical Latin is to vineyard Italian — is a conundrum I choose not to answer in this document. Let he or she who one day unearths this text unscramble the oddities of chance and experience that brought me, "rushing headlong toward suicide," to this place half a mile beneath the Oasis of Siwa.

A blind thrust-fault hitherto unrecorded beneath the Mountain of the Moon had produced a cataclysmic 7.5 temblor. It had leveled villages as far away as Bir Bu Kusa and Abu Simbel. The aerial and satellite reconnaissance from the Gulf of Sidra to the Red Sea, from the Libyan Plateau to the Sudan, showed great fissures, herniated valleys, upthrust structures, a new world lost to human sight for thousands of years. An international team of paleoseismologists was assembled, and I was called from the Great Boneyard of the Gobi by my superiors at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences at Ulan Bator to leave my triceratops and fly to the middle of hell on earth, the great sand ocean of the Sahara, to assist in excavating and analyzing what some said would be the discovery of the age.

Some said it was the mythical Shrine of Ammon.

Some said it was the Temple of the Oracle.

Alexander the Great, at the very pinnacle of his fame, was told of the Temple, and of the all-knowing Oracle who sat there. And so he came, from the shore of Egypt down into the deep Sahara, seeking the Oracle. It is recorded: his expedition was lost, wandering hopelessly, without water and without hope. Then crows came to lead them down through the

Mountain of the Moon, down to a hidden valley without name, to the lake of the Oasis of Siwa, and at its center...the temple, the Shrine of Ammon. It was so recorded. And one thing more. In a small and dark chamber roofed with palm logs, the Egyptian priests told Alexander a thing that affected him for the rest of his life. It is not recorded what he was told. And never again, we have always been led to believe, has the Shrine of Ammon been seen by civilized man or civilized woman.

Now, Amy Guiterman and I, she from the Brooklyn Museum and I an honored graduate of Beijing University, together we had followed Alexander's route from Paraetonium to Siwa to here, hundreds of kilometers beyond human thought or action, half a mile down, where the gigantic claw diggers had ceased their abrading, the two of us with simple pick and shovel, standing on the last thin layer of compacted dirt and rock that roofed whatever great shadowy structure lay beneath us, a shadow picked up by the most advanced deep-resonance-response readings, verified on-site by proton free-precession magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar brought in from the Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the United States.

Something large lay just beneath our feet.

And tomorrow, at sunrise, the team would assemble to break through and share the discovery, whatever it might be.

But I had had knowledge of Amy Guiterman's body, and she was as reckless as I, rushing headlong toward suicide, and in a moment of foolishness, a moment that should have passed but did not, we sneaked out of camp and went to the site and lowered ourselves, taking with us nylon rope and crampons, powerful electric torches and small recording devices, trowel and whisk broom, cameras and carabiners. A pick and a shovel. I offer no excuse. We were young, we were reckless, we were smitten with each other, and we behaved like naughty children. What happened should not have happened.



WE BROKE THROUGH the final alluvial layer and swept out the broken pieces. We stood atop a ceiling of fitted stones, basalt or even marble, I could not tell immediately. I knew they were not granite, that much I did know. There were seams. Using the pick, I prised loose the ancient and

concretized mortar. It went much more quickly and easily than I would have thought, but then, I'm used to digging for bones, not for buildings. I managed to chock the large set-stone in place with wooden wedges, until I had guttered the perimeter fully. Then, inching the toe of the pick into the fissure, I began levering the stone up, sliding the wedges deeper to keep the huge block from slipping back. And finally, though the block was at least sixty or seventy centimeters thick, we were able to tilt it up and, bracing our backs against the opposite side of the hole we had dug at the bottom of the core pit, we were able to use our strong young legs to force it back and away, beyond the balance point; and it fell away with a crash.

A great wind escaped the aperture that had housed the stone. A great wind that twisted up from below in a dark swirl that we could actually see. Amy Guiterman gave a little sound of fear and startlement. So did I. Then she said, "They would have used great amounts of charcoal to set these limestone blocks in place," and I learned from her that they were not marble, neither were they basalt.

We showed each other our bravery by dangling our feet through the opening, sitting at the edge and leaning over to catch the wind. It smelled *sweet*. Not a smell I had ever known before. But certainly not stagnant. Not corrupt. Sweet as a washed face, sweet as chilled fruit. Then we lit our torches and swept the beams below.

We sat just above the ceiling of a great chamber. Neither pyramid nor mausoleum, it seemed to be an immense hall filled with enormous statues of pharaohs and beast-headed gods and creatures with neither animal nor human shape...and all of these statues gigantic. Perhaps one hundred times life-size.

Directly beneath us was the noble head of a time-lost ruler, wearing the *nemes* headdress and the royal ritual beard. Where our digging had dropped shards of rock, the shining yellow surface of the statue had been chipped, and a darker material showed through. "Diorite," Amy Guiterman said. "Covered with gold. Pure gold. Lapis lazuli, turquoise, garnets, rubies — the headdress is made of thousands of gems, all precisely cut...do you see?"

But I was lowering myself. Having cinched my climbing rope around the excised block, I was already shinnying down the cord to stand on the first ledge I could manage, the empty place between the placid hands of the

pharaoh that lay on the golden knees. I heard Amy Guiterman scrambling down behind and above me.

Then the wind rose again, suddenly, shrieking up and around me like a monsoon, and the rope was ripped from my hands, and my torch was blown away, and I was thrown back and something sharp caught at the back of my shirt and I wrenched forward to fall on my stomach and I felt the cold of that wind on my bare back. And everything was dark.

Then I felt cold hands on me. All over me. Reaching, touching, probing me, as if I were a cut of sliced meat lying on a counter. Above me I heard Amy Guiterman shrieking. I felt the halves of my ripped shirt torn from my body, and then my kerchief, and then my boots, and then my stockings, and then my watch and glasses.

I struggled to my feet and took a position, ready to make an empassing or killing strike. I was no cinema action hero, but whatever was there plucking at me would have to take my life despite I fought for it!

Then, from below, light began to rise. Great light, the brightest light I've ever seen, like a shimmering fog. And as it rose, I could see that the mist that filled the great chamber beneath us was trying to reach us, to touch us, to feel us with hands of ephemeral chilling ghostliness. Dead hands. Hands of beings and men who might never have been or who, having been, were denied their lives. They reached, they sought, they implored.

And rising from the mist, with a howl, Anubis.

God of the dead, jackal-headed conductor of souls. Opener of the road to the afterlife. Embalmer of Osiris, Lord of the mummy wrappings, ruler of the dark passageways, watcher at the neverending funeral. Anubis came, and we were left, suddenly, ashamed and alone, the American girl and I, who had acted rashly as do all those who flee toward their own destruction.

But he did not kill us, did not take us. How could he...am I not writing this for some never-to-be-known reader to find? He roared yet again, and the hands of the seekers drew back, reluctantly, like whipped curs into kennels, and there in the soft golden light reflected from the icon of a pharaoh dead and gone so long that no memory exists even of his name, there in the space half a mile down, the great god Anubis spoke to us.

At first, he thought we were "the great conqueror" come again. No,

I told him, not Alexander. And the great god laughed with a terrible thin laugh that brought to mind paper cuts and the slicing of eyeballs. No, of course not that one, said the great god, for did I not reveal to him the great secret? Why should he ever return? Why should he not flee as fast as his great army could carry him, and never return? And Anubis laughed.

I was young and I was foolish, and I asked the jackal-headed god to tell me the great secret. If I was to perish here, at least I could carry to the afterlife a great wisdom.

Anubis looked through me.

Do you know why I guard this tomb?

I said I did not know, but that perhaps it was to protect the wisdom of the Oracle, to keep hidden the great secret of the Shrine of Ammon that had been given to Alexander.

And Anubis laughed the more. Vicious laughter that made me wish I had never grown skin or taken air into my lungs.

This is not the Shrine of Ammon, he said. Later they may have said it was, but this is what it has always been, the tomb of the Most Accursed One. The Defiler. The Nemesis. The Killer of the dream that lasted twice six thousand years. I guard this tomb to deny him entrance to the afterlife.

And I guard it to pass on the great secret.

"Then you don't plan to kill us?" I asked. Behind me I heard Amy Guiterman snort with disbelief that I, a graduate of Beijing University, could ask such an imbecile question. Anubis looked through me again, and said no, I don't have to do that. It is not my job. And then, with no prompting at all, he told me, and he told Amy Guiterman from the Brooklyn Museum, he told us the great secret that had lain beneath the sands since the days of Alexander. And then he told us whose tomb it was. And then he vanished into the mist. And then we climbed back out, hand over hand, because our ropes were gone, and my clothes were gone, and Amy Guiterman's pack and supplies were gone, but we still had our lives.

At least for the moment.

I write this now, in Yin, and I set down the great secret in its every particular. All parts of it, and the three colors, and the special names, and the pacing. It's all here, for whoever finds it, because the tomb is gone again. Temblor or jackal-god, I cannot say. But if today, as opposed to last night, you seek that shadow beneath the sand, you will find emptiness.

Now we go our separate ways, Amy Guiterman and I. She to her destiny, and I to mine. It will not be long in finding us. At the height of his power, soon after visiting the Temple of the Oracle, where he was told something that affected him for the rest of his life, Alexander the Great died of a mosquito bite. It is said. Alexander the Great died of an overdose of drink and debauchery. It is said. Alexander the Great died of murder, he was poisoned. It is said. Alexander the Great died of a prolonged, nameless fever; of pneumonia; of typhus; of septicemia; of typhoid; of eating off tin plates; of malaria. It is said. Alexander was a bold and energetic king at the peak of his powers, it is written, but during his last months in Babylon, for no reason anyone has ever been able to explain satisfactorily, he took to heavy drinking and nightly debauches...and then the fever came for him.

A mosquito. It is said.

No one will bother to say what has taken me. Or Amy Guiterman. We are insignificant. But we know the great secret.

Anubis likes to chat. The jackal-headed one has no secrets he chooses to keep. He'll tell it all. Secrecy is not his job. Revenge is his job. Anubis guards the tomb, and eon by eon makes revenge for his fellow gods.

The tomb is the final resting place of the one who killed the gods. When belief in the gods vanishes, when the worshippers of the gods turn away their faces, then the gods themselves vanish. Like the mist that climbs and implores, they go. And the one who lies encrypted there, guarded by the lord of the funeral, is the one who brought the world to forget Isis and Osiris and Horus and Anubis. He is the one who opened the sea, and the one who wandered in the desert. He is the one who went to the mountaintop, and he is the one who brought back the word of yet another god. He is Moses, and for Anubis revenge is not only sweet, it is everlasting. Moses — denied both Heaven and Hell — will never rest in the Afterlife. Revenge without pity has doomed him to eternal exclusion, buried in the sepulcher of the gods he killed.

I sink this now, in an unmarked meter of dirt, at a respectable depth; and I go my way, bearing the great secret, no longer needing to "rush headlong," as I have already committed what suicide is necessary. I go my way, for however long I have, leaving only this warning for anyone who may yet seek the lost Shrine of Ammon. In the words of Amy Guiterman of New York City, spoken to a jackal-headed deity, "I've got to tell you, Anubis, you are one tough grader." ॐ



SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

A WARM AND DANGEROUS TIME

SHAKESPEARE, if he'd known about it, might have admired and even envied the drama of a certain small period—only 80 million years—of Earth's 4.5 billion year old history. The Cretaceous had everything. Consider the setting: a mild climate, green decor and lots of new-fangled things called flowers. The cast of mobile characters featured huge monsters, while furry bit players scurried under the scenery. And, of course, there was that smasheroo of an ending.

The Cretaceous period was only the last act of the mighty Mesozoic era. The Mesozoic began 248 million years ago, after the Permian period ended with the Great Dying, when about 96 percent of life became extinct. The Permian extinctions are somewhat mysterious, but probably caused by the travels and

breakup of the supercontinent Pangea. Ocean circulation was altered, the planet's temperature fluctuated, and there were volcanic eruptions, sun-obscuring dust, and acid rain.

The first period of the Mesozoic was the Triassic, during which the surviving 4 percent of life proliferated and evolved. Dinosaurs developed from thecodont reptiles, and some therapsid reptiles became rather mammalian. The Triassic ended with many extinctions, perhaps from an "impact event," perhaps not.

The next period of the Mesozoic era—the Jurassic—began 213 million years ago and was even more spectacular than the movie. Swimming reptiles filled the waters and flying reptiles filled the air. Dinosaurs dominated a land covered with cycads, ferns, ginkgos and conifers. Our mammalian ancestors were

small and probably scared most of the time because they were preyed on not only by reptiles and the remaining amphibians, but also by the first birds.

Then the supercontinents of Laurasia and Gondwana (into which Pangea had split) began to come apart. Sea level and climate changes caused many extinctions, including dinosaurs like Stegosaurus, Allosaurus and (in North America), the big sauropods like Apatosaurus.

The curtain then rose on the Cretaceous period, 144 million years ago. Earth was still changing (it always does but our lives are too short for us to notice) and a seaway began to split North America. In the southern continent of Gondwana a rift developed between Australia and Antarctica.

Exactly how and when the continents separated has been subject to debate. South American dinosaurs differed from North American, but it was thought that they would be similar to those of Africa. After all, Africa and South America had been joined, their undersea continental shelves fitting together.

Two years ago in the Sahara desert, Paul C. Sereno (University of Chicago) and his colleagues discovered 130 million-year-old fossils from the early Cretaceous. The

30-foot carnivore named *Afrovenator abakensis* was related to the fierce predator Allosaurus that had lived 30 million years before in the Jurassic of North America. Broad-toothed sauropods were similar to the Jurassic North American Camarasaurus.

These African dinosaurs were not at all like those from the Cretaceous of South America, but seemed to be holdovers from the Jurassic. To Sereno, this indicates that the African part of Gondwana's connection to North America lasted longer than the one to South America.

The feathered variety of dinosaur made a strong showing in the early Cretaceous. When 135 million-year-old *Sinornis* was found to have a jaw containing teeth, paleontologists assumed that birds had not changed much since the late Jurassic's *Archaeopteryx*, 12 million years older.

Evolved from reptilian scales, beaks are light-weight structures made of keratin, replacing teeth and lips. For years it was thought that the first bird with a true beak was *Gobiteryx*, from 70 million years ago in the late Cretaceous.

Recently a new bird from the early Cretaceous holds the title of first beak, according to a Chinese and American team of paleontolo-

gists — Lian-hai Hou, Zhonghe Zhou, Larry D. Martin and Alan Feduccia. Given the charming name of *Confuciusornis sanctus*, the 140 million-year-old species consists so far of three partial skeletons found in Northeastern China.

Pigeon-sized *Confuciusornis* probably perched on tree limbs, for the fossils were found in what had once been a fresh-water lake ringed by forest. Furthermore, *Confuciusornis* had the typical avian three anterior toes with recurved claws on the long middle toe. Although it had the primitive long bony tail and claws on feathered wings, its jaw had been replaced by a bill.

Since *Confuciusornis* lived in China and only 7 million years later than the European *Archaeopteryx*, it seems likely that the first birds spread quickly and diversified early. Why did they lose their teeth?

Beaks are an asset to fliers because they weigh less than toothy jaws. Another theory is that beaks go along with the loss of efficient hands: teeth inevitably get in the way when you are trying — without hands — to turn captured prey around so it will go down the gullet head first.

I don't know why, if you are a predatory bird, your food has to be

swallowed head first. Perhaps it's because much of your food also has teeth, and your gullet will constrict around its head while its body is still wriggling outside your mouth (in case, like the Klingons, you didn't bother to kill it first).

Confuciusornis was not the ancestor of modern birds for it was enantiornithine, with foot bones partially fused from the top down, and all enantiornithine birds became extinct at the end of the Cretaceous. Modern birds have foot bones partially fused from the bottom up.

Some scientists believe that modern birds diversified during the Cretaceous, but Feduccia thinks that the only modern bird living then was like the present-day shorebird, the stone curlew.

After the cataclysm at the end of the Cretaceous, birds like the curlew might have been able to go on eating shoreline animals while the dominant enantiornithine birds died along with the dinosaurs. Then these shorebirds diversified to fill all the avian biological niches, much the way the finches that were blown to the Galapagos Islands have — within historical times — developed many kinds of beaks to eat different types of food.

During the Cretaceous the early birds had to compete with flying

reptiles. These pterosaurs evolved from reptiles that had learned to glide during the Triassic. Their wings were made of skin stretched along the elongated arm and the upper leg.

Pterosaurs were the largest vertebrates ever to fly, the biggest called *Quetzalcoatlus*, with a wingspan up to 39 feet. Some pterosaurs were more light-weight because they no longer had bony tails, and some had unusual heads.

In the early Cretaceous a pterosaur called *Pterodactylus* had a mouth full of what looked like bristles that presumably helped it accomplish filter-feeding. By studying sections of the bristles with an electron microscope, Luis M. Chiappe (New York's American Museum of Natural History) and A. Chinsamy (South African Museum) found that these bristles were not made of material derived from the epidermis, like whale baleen or the bills of modern filter-feeding birds. The bristles, however strange, were genuine teeth.

Many pterosaurs fed on the proliferating teleost fish of the Cretaceous, but there were also plenty of other water-dwelling reptiles like huge turtles and crocodilians. A 120 million-year-old crocodile found recently was not even carnivorous. Its teeth showed that it ate plants!

The dominant sea reptiles of the previous period had been live-bearing ichthyosaurs. In the Cretaceous they had been reduced to a single species, *Platypterygius*, and the seas were dominated by another reptile, the egg-laying plesiosaurs that used flippers to "fly" through water (the way penguins do today).

The reptilian and avian creatures of the Cretaceous were certainly more eye-catching than the mammals. Some of the most primitive mammals were the little-known multituberculates, who may have been ancestral to the monotremes or could have arisen independently. Named for the rows of uniform cusps on their teeth, the multituberculates lived past the end of the Cretaceous before becoming extinct after 150 million years of existence.

During the Cretaceous, the well-known early mammals were monotremes — furry and warm-blooded, small (mostly mouse-sized), not very bright, and egg-laying. Paleontologists in Australia have recently discovered the jawbone of a Cretaceous monotreme called *Kollikodon ritchiei*, 120 million years old.

Kollikodon was so different from a previously discovered monotreme, *Steropodon*, that it's

probable that monotremes had taken on many forms long before the Cretaceous. Cat-sized, Kollikodon was 10 times bigger than any other mammal alive then. It may have lived mostly in water because — like some modern fish, crabs, and sea otters — it had teeth adapted for chomping on shellfish.

Magnificent dinosaur bones do tend to distract from the little bones of Cretaceous mammals, but given Kollikodon, it's possible that our distant ancestors were more interesting and colorful than we've thought.

Our self-image may be improved by a treasure trove of mammalian fossils recently found at a late Cretaceous Mongolian site named Flaming Cliffs.

Examining these fossils, Michael J. Novacek (American Museum of Natural History) says that the mammals were more diverse than had been suspected — "the Cretaceous gives us the first inkling of the roots of our ancestry."

Many more rocks in that Gobi desert site are still being investigated. After that, according to Jay Lillegraven (University of Wyoming), we'll be clearer on mammalian diversity that had produced "leaf and seed eaters as well as animals that fed on grubs."

Which brings me to what the land herbivores were eating. In the Cretaceous, vegetation was changing. The angiosperms — flowering plants — were gradually taking land away from the gymnosperms.

According to Michael J. Sanderson (University of Nevada) and Michael J. Donoghue (Harvard University), the ancestors of angiosperms may have split off from their closest anthophyte relatives in the late Triassic, 210 million years ago.

During the Jurassic, angiosperms had spread very slowly, but after the extinctions at the end of that period, there was time for flowering plants to get going before the next batch of hungry herbivores took over.

In the Cretaceous, angiosperms soon diversified into five major clades. Sanderson and Donoghue think that the spurt in angiosperm diversity may have been due to the evolution of plants with "accelerated life cycles."

This evolution toward faster botanical living may have been helped by climate alterations that increased remarkably during the mid-Cretaceous, thanks to dramatic geological changes.

Roger Larson (University of Rhode Island) showed that ocean

crust formed faster during the mid-Cretaceous, about 125 million years ago. Huge flows of hot melted rock poured out over the floors of the Pacific and Indian oceans, raising sea levels, while outgassing of carbon dioxide created a greenhouse effect.

One theory is that this mid-Cretaceous event was caused by the eruption of a gigantic "superplume" of lava from the mantle of Earth. Don Anderson (Cal Tech), however, thinks that the outflow of hot basalt was due to the long duration of Gondwana's existence. A supercontinent tends to promote the building up of heat within the mantle. When Gondwana split, heat was released by volcanos and earthquakes, not by a superplume.

Whatever the explanation, mid-Cretaceous Earth soon had shallower, warmer seas, a hotter climate, and different animals. Angiosperms flourished.

We know that many herbivores continued to eat non-flowering plants because the remains of conifers were found — by Karen Chin (University of California at Santa Barbara) — in 100 million-year-old fossilized dino dung from what had been the burrows of Cretaceous dung beetles.

Gymnosperms like conifers do not grow as fast and are not as adaptable as angiosperms. A herd of enormous medium to high browsing herbivores could easily overgraze conifers and cycads, leaving open spaces in which the fast-growing seeds of flowering plants could prosper.

After the mid-Cretaceous change, there were many new herbivores like Triceratops and Iguanodon whose bodies and teeth were adapted for low-feeding, so they were efficient munchers of the early angiosperms. Some angiosperms retaliated by growing quickly to heights above these low-browsers.

According to paleontologist Robert T. Bakker, the lowfeeding dinosaurs helped promote the success of angiosperms even while they ate them. Dinosaurs like Triceratops were big and could devour a lot of flowering plants, but they could not do it as fast as some angiosperms could flower, reproduce, and root again. Those faster angiosperms prospered.

Our modern dandelions are speedy angiosperms. Their yellow flowers are followed quickly by downy-sailed seeds before you remember that you were supposed to mow the lawn. Even when you do

mow it, the dandelion roots are still there and ready to do the whole thing all over again — examples of the kind of angiosperm that evolved to survive heavy low feeding.

Some Cretaceous birds may have pollinated the new flowers, but the main work was done by insects, whose ability to fly was now exploited by angiosperms.

Insects have been flying for 300 million years. The latest theory about how they achieved this is that the gill flaps of some insects increased in size. This provided lift for the bodies to elevate on the legs, allowing these insects to skim the water's surface tension like skaters on ice.

Leaving the water altogether and rising into the air was a cinch once the flaps became actual wings. Insects with wings were attracted to the new flowering plants, and soon insects and flowers were evolving together, surviving handily in a world full of plant-eaters.

Among these plant-eaters was a late Cretaceous hadrosaur, a duck-billed dinosaur named *Maiasaura* — good mother lizard — by paleontologist John B. Horner. It's thought that *Maiasaura* may have been the species that left behind those fossilized feces, but its real fame is for making nests.

A baby *Maiasaura* used a sharp projection on the end of its nose to break out of its shell. Then it apparently stayed in the nest with its brothers and sisters, which means that its mother (and even its father) had to tend the nest and bring it food. Modern baby turtles have no such luck — they hatch out untended by any adult — but some modern crocodiles do tend their babies.

Other dinosaurs also made nests, some in large colonies. Last year Spanish paleontologists reported that one colony of dinosaur nests found in the southern Pyrenees contained the remains of almost 300,000 eight-inch-wide spherical eggs, in an area that had once been a beach.

Apparently herds of as yet unknown dinosaurs repeatedly used this beach for nesting, crowded as close together as the nesting sites of many modern birds.

But did dinosaurs ever brood their offspring the way most birds do, sitting on the nest until the eggs are hatched and even afterwards? It's certainly hard to imagine one of the more immense dinosaurs sitting on its eggs, but at least one small dinosaur did.

In one of the most marvelous dinosaur discoveries ever made, an

80 million-year-old fossil was recently found in the Gobi desert of Mongolia by a joint expedition of the American Museum of Natural History and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

Painstaking excavation revealed a carnivorous dinosaur named *Oviraptor*, a theropod relative of the Cretaceous *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the Jurassic predator *Allosaurus*, but about the size of a small ostrich. This dinosaur had died on its nest, where the eggs were arranged in a circular pattern with their broad ends toward the nest's center.

The *Oviraptor* was obviously brooding those eggs, for it (I hesitate saying "she" because many modern male birds also brood) had positioned its long arms and legs protectively around the eggs the way birds do. The photograph of its skeleton on the eggs is curiously moving.

Brooding behavior occurs, surprisingly enough, in the python, a cold-blooded reptile. In the tropics, where the eggs will stay warm anyway, the python seems to be merely guarding them. In the cooler areas of Australia, the mother snake basks in the sun to heat her body and, presumably, the eggs she coils around. The Indian python rhythmically contracts her muscles to

raise her own body temperature while she's brooding.

Since pythons are cold-blooded, egg-brooding is not an absolute guarantee that *Oviraptor* was warm-blooded. Mark A. Norell and colleagues, who found the fossil, remind us that brooding could also be for protection and to shade the eggs.

Which brings me to the fact that—from all sorts of evidence—many people now believe that dinosaurs were warm-blooded. Others say that dino bone structure is intermediate between reptiles and warm-blooded birds and mammals.

I agree with those who believe that dinos were "in between," and *unique*. It's a waste of time trying to jam everything into neat categories.

Before I leave the dinosaurs of the Cretaceous, I must add a few words about *T. rex*, who wasn't even the biggest carnivore (that's 9-ton *Gigantosaurus carolinii* of Argentina) and is known from only 12 fossils, so far. But *T. rex* fits into a "dangerous but beloved" category all his own.

[I'm sorry about using the word "his." We tend to associate larger size, aggression and mayhem with males, but that's illogical. Remember the female praying mantis? And

the many other animal species whose females are not only bigger but deadlier? One of my favorite cartoons is the (bigger) male lion saying to the (smaller but deadlier) female, "Aren't you supposed to be out getting me my dinner?"

The American Museum has now positioned T. rex with his body horizontal, running full out with his head toward the humans coming into the exhibit hall. James Farlow (Indiana-Purdue University) thinks T. rex would have had to run at less than 35 kilometers per hour in order to be safe from disastrous falls (fatal if you're going fast and weigh up to 6 tons).

That's all right. Even going slowly, with his neck stretched out and his teeth shining, a Tyrannosaurus would have frightened off other scavengers from a carcass — unless a scavenger was another T. rex.

Amateur paleontologist Steven Sacrisson found that according to the evidence of their bones, T. rex often battled to the death with those of his own kind. There are vertebrae bitten in half, and only another T. rex had the jaws for this. One skull contained a hole just the size of a T. rex tooth. An actual piece of T. rex tooth was imbedded in another's broken rib.

The warm and dangerous Cretaceous ended 65 million years ago with the extinction of many animals, including all the dinosaurs except a few birds. When geophysicists David M. Raup and David Jablonski (University of Chicago) analyzed fossil bivalve mollusks from the Cretaceous, their data indicate that the extinction was world-wide, including many ocean species.

This "K-T" boundary disaster was due to an object or objects from space crashing on Earth. The primary site was the enormous Chicxulub crater in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, caused by something as large as 10 kilometers.

There is also a 35-kilometer wide crater in Iowa from the same time period. Evidence for a third site in the Pacific ocean was found by the Deep Sea Drilling Program that brought up K-T deposits containing large amounts of iridium, characteristic of melted meteoric debris.

Some people think the three sites were caused by three comets hitting Earth at once, but it's more likely that a large asteroid broke up as it zoomed in on Earth. The disaster filled the air with particles that shut out sunlight, causing several years of deep gloom that must have been like the dreaded "nuclear win-

ter" we humans could inflict upon ourselves.

There was no radioactive fallout 65 million years ago, but in addition to the dust-filled atmosphere, the impact or impacts set off fires that burned much of Earth's vegetation and contributed to the deadly air pollution.

In "what if" scenarios, it's fun to speculate on what would have happened if there'd been no K-T disaster, if the dinosaurs had gone on living — as they already had been, for over 180 million years.

Would the dinosaurs have become intelligent eventually? Would they have created their own civilizations, complete with space ships and ambitions to colonize not only the Solar System but beyond?

Probably, although it seems to me that egg-laying is a handicap to successful evolution of high intelligence. Primates that were becoming hairless hominids could carry their big-brained, helpless young, but eggs?

Medium-sized, bipedal, bright dinosaurs with hands might have succeeded if they'd become live-bearing. And maybe they'd have grown a little fur, at least on the tops of their heads, to shield them from the sun.

Imagining Earth's history without that K-T boundary seems to result in a fantastic image of a live-bearing, handy, slightly furry creature perhaps too bright for its own good, who could create civilization, kill off many other animal species, destroy the environment, and produce a rise in global temperature.

Which brings to mind the fact that the "T" in K-T boundary stands for the Tertiary period, when the surviving mammals dominated. Eventually those surviving mammals evolved the most dominating and dangerous predator of them all.

Who, during its increasingly warm and dangerous time, had better keep scanning space for incoming large objects.



Almost all of R. Garcia y Robertson's short stories for F&SF have inspired covers. "The Moon Maid" is no different. This time, Doug Anderson brings Rod's vision to life.

About "The Moon Maid," Rod writes, "The story is historical-fantasy, where the 'fantasy element' is historical (based mainly on Herodotus and Diodorus) and the 'non-fantasy' parts are invention. But that is how we tend to see the distant parts of space-time — not as the inhabitants report them, but as we assume 'it must have been.'"

The Moon Maid

By R. Garcia y Robertson

The Laughing Steppe



ON THE FIRST DAY OF HER twenty-second spring, a Moon Maid topped a low rise in the Laughing Steppe, riding her dark mare toward a nomad wagon lager. She was dressed in animal skins, a fur-lined fleece jacket over stag leather pants and calfskin boots; her hair hung in long black ringlets from a silver crescent-moon comb. Bow, quiver and mirror case banged against her sheepskin saddlecloth. Grease and grime protected her face from the boreal wind. She was an only daughter, and her mother had named her Aganippe — "The Mare that Kills with Mercy."

Wailing drifted over the long grass from the Cimmerian camp. A cold wind in her face carried the odors of death — dried blood, burnt frankincense, anise, and lion scent — making her mare shy. Aganippe leaned down, stroking her mount's shaggy coat. "Easy Melanippe. Ignore the smells and admire the stallions." Mollified, the black mare set out again,

trampling wildflowers pushing up between patches of snow — anemones, irises, and wild tulips.

The Hetman in his sable cloak met her at the entrance to the lager, backed by a mob of armed men with fierce tattooed faces. He was twice her age, with a forked beard, frost gray eyes, and a face as long as a saiga antelope's. In his right hand he held a bronze-tipped spear — his left was pierced by an arrow shaft, showing he mourned his son and heir. Tears streaked the grease on his cheeks.

Aganippe dismounted and gave her name, saying she was from the Lion Shrine. Men stiffened, staring sideways at her, making signs against witchcraft.

Grounding his spear, the Hetman spat in his right palm, then reached to shake her hand — showing he did not fear her magic. Next to blood, spittle is the most prized ingredient for fixing spells. "Come," he told her, "see what your lion has done."

Swallowing her anger, Aganippe shook the man's soggy palm. What did these nomads know about lions? They were Cimmerian battle-ax folk, *kazakhs* who called the gods by strange names, raising temples to war and slaughter. Driven south by a bad winter, they had overstayed their welcome. With the grass well up, they should be following the frost line north. Instead they were making accusations — threatening to extend the visit.

The Hetman's son was laid out on a cart. He looked to be about sixteen summers; his body was slit up the middle and stuffed with straw, galingale, parsley-seed, and anise. Head and shoulders hung at an angle. Older wives were comforting the boy's mother and her young daughter-in-law, who were down in the dirt, faces furrowed by their own fingernails, shrieking at the heartless gods who let this happen.

Aganippe had hoped to see the slash marks of a leopard, but the throat and chest had been torn open by a single bite — otherwise the boy was barely touched. Just a claw mark on the thigh, where the beast braced a paw as it bit down. Only one cat killed that casually.

Staring into the face of a corpse is sure to make you question where life is headed. Aganippe felt a surge of pity for the child-widow, wondering what it would be like to cleave to one man, to raise his sons, to weave and spin instead of wearing skins and serving the Lion Shrine. The girl had

been pretty, with somber eyes and a wide sensitive mouth. Now she was bereft and terrified, clutching her remaining child, a baby daughter. Hers was certainly a miserable lot, alone among pitiless strangers, with no son or husband to give her life.

Fortunately she would not suffer long. At the funeral a bowstring would be looped around the girl's neck, with a short stick thrust through it. After an appropriate prayer the noose would be twisted tight, so she might be buried beside her boy husband.

Aganippe told the Hetman, "Show me where this happened."

The nomad chief motioned with his spear. Boys took her mare, and she followed the Hetman past where his yurt stood atop a cutbank, closest to wood and water. Human scalps fluttered atop his tall standard-pole, and a hooded eagle preened herself on a padded stand — a hunting bird big enough to bring down a young gazelle.

Upstream from the yurt, Aganippe saw the deep broad pug marks of a large lion. She knelt and felt the mud. It had hardened, preserving prints laid down before last night's frost. Sticking her nose in the nearest pug mark, she sniffed, then went on to the next, and the next, until she had examined every print. When she was done, she rested on her heels, listening to lowing cattle. A cold feeling crept over her. "Did anyone see this happen?"

The Hetman shrugged. "Thralls watering cattle heard a scream and loosed the dogs." No help there. The knots of cattle by the bank were tended by blinded slaves.

Aganippe turned back to the tracks. Utterly illiterate, she had seen enough kill sites to read the muddy bank like a Babylonian scanning a clay tablet. "In late afternoon a young man with a spear and a child with a water jar came down to the stream." There was a rounded gouge and a circular mark, where the man had leaned on his spear and the child had set down the jar.

The long-faced Hetman nodded. "My son took his daughter to draw water."

Aganippe pointed out a matted bowl of wheat grass on the far bank. "The lion had been waiting for some time, and leaped straight onto the child. Your son dashed to his daughter's aid" — she showed where the boy's strides lengthened to a run — "and the lion turned to meet him, dropping the child." Aganippe traced out the curving claw marks and the

shallow imprint of a tiny body, also the bigger body print where the lion brought the young father down. Then the lion's prints turned again, vanishing across the stream and into the tall grass, forepaws pressed deeper by the dead weight of the child in its teeth.

The only distinctive feature of the pug marks was the way the left forepaw splayed outward, making the killer easier to track. A good omen, she thought. A godsend actually. Something needed to be done soon to appease these Cimmerians.

The Hetman led her up to his yurt, sitting her down inside, pouring wine with his own bloody hands. Aganippe thanked him. The place stank even by nomad standards, reeking of sweat and urine — but he was her host, and wine would brace her for what had to follow.

"This is an *Oeorpata*," the Hetman told her, laying emphasis on the last word, "mankiller," which had a double meaning. It was also a name for Amazons, like the Moon Maids of the Lion Shrine — mankillers who obeyed no laws but their own.

"No," Aganippe corrected him, "this is a child-killer." The lion had not turned on the father until the man attacked. That was what scared her most. The beast passed up cattle and sightless herdsman, waiting patiently until the little girl appeared. And after bringing down the Hetman's son it ignored the bigger meal, turning back for the child.

This was a thinking beast who knew humans, a hunter that picked just the prey it wanted, refusing to be swayed. Aganippe had known a man-eating leopard that stepped over a sleeping herdsman, and stood *atop* another, to get at a third. Like humans, lions specialized. Some hunt antelope, others kill cattle. Prides in Libya hunted elephants. But once cats tasted human flesh, and found it easy to take, they almost never forgot. If a lion dragged its prey home, feeding it to the cubs, a whole pride became infected.

Luckily none of the local prides had a large active lioness with a splayed left forefoot — this looked to be a wandering male who had learned his killing ways somewhere else.

The Hetman tugged at his forked beard. "When I sent word to the Lion Shrine, my men protested. They claimed it would slight us if an Amazon brought in the lion — though the younger ones are eager enough to lie down in the long grass with any Moon Maid who is willing."

She sipped from the Hetman's golden cup, carved from the skull of a clan enemy. "And what do you think?"

His grief-scarred face softened. "When I was young, I too liked to lie in the long grass with the Moon Maids — but I got only daughters. You might even be one of them. You have the courage for it, coming alone to an angry camp."

Aganippe took this as a compliment. Moon Maids naturally fantasized about their fathers. As a girl she imagined hers to be a famous warrior, a vagabond prince, or some god's son — never a nomad Hetman.

"But bravery is not enough." He tilted his head toward the entrance flap, to indicate his warriors and kinsmen crowded outside. "They are brave. And could easily bring me a lion. I could even kill one myself. But I want you to bring me *the* lion — the beast that took my son and granddaughter."

Aganippe nodded. "That is what I mean to do." She was not going to kill just *any* lion.

"Then swear to it." The Cimmerian brought out a great bowl, beaten from a hundred bronze arrowheads. Filling it with wine, he mixed in blood from his left hand. Lifting his spear, he told Aganippe, "Give me your arm."

A blood oath was totally unneeded, and none too pleasant — but to satisfy him, Aganippe bared her arm, holding it over the bowl.

The Hetman pressed the razor-edged spear point against her flesh. The spear shaft was inlaid with sea shells, but the point was a local copper-arsenic alloy. He bore down until it drew blood. Then he jabbed the weapon point first into the wine bowl. "This spear was mine, until I gave it to my son. Swear you will bring it back with his killer's blood on the blade."

Aganippe swore by the Hearth Maiden, by the Snake-tailed Mother, and by the Black-faced Mistress. Then they drank.

Wiping blood and wine from his lips, the Hetman added, "And do it soon. Or we will come looking for a lion."

Aganippe took up the spear and left. Outside the yurt she saw the Hetman's son sitting up in his painted cart, stuffed with straw and spices, wearing his best gold-embroidered jacket — all set to go calling. His child-wife sat at his side, dressed in silk and ermine, looking woefully pretty, her

hair combed back from her scratched face, her spirit snapped like a broken spear shaft. For the next forty days wife and corpse would go around the yurts, feasting as if he were alive.

The scalps overhead snapped in the breeze. Aganippe knew that if she disappointed this Hetman, he had the means to make her wish *she* were sharing his son's couch in Hades. She held down another surge of anger.

Aganippe had lain with several young warriors, and on the whole rather enjoyed having a sturdy nomad thrusting inside her, galloping in the grass with her calves hooked behind his. But to say that if one of them died then she should be throttled and buried beside him — that was absurd. If this was law, Aganippe was happy to be beyond it.

Leading her mare down to the water's edge, she went over the tracks until she could see the pug marks in her sleep. Then she set out, looking for dark flecks on the grass tops of the Laughing Steppe.

Lions could be taken with a bow and spear. Pharaoh Amenhotep had brought down over a hundred that way. But he went out with a mob of beaters, a chariot to shoot from, and a ring of spearmen to keep the beasts off him — outings so ostentatious they could hardly be called hunts. Aganippe had only herself, and her mare.

Soon the filthy sprawling camp and its huge bleating herds were swallowed by the great dun-green sea of grass. Aganippe was alone under a sky so vast the sun seemed to shrink into blue emptiness. She could see no more than a few paces into the tall grass — a charging lion could cover that distance in half a heartbeat. A twitch in the grass tops would be her only warning. Nor was being mounted an advantage. Surprised and terrified horses were a staple of the lion diet.

Hearing was her best defense. That man-eating leopard had sprung at her without a sound, but a lion usually gives a low grunt to freeze its prey. Not always though. Lions made silent charges just often enough to keep things interesting. She had managed to kill the leopard, but never a lion.

And *this* lion knew all about hunting people, having taken its prey from under the snotty suspicious noses of a thousand armed nomads. Aganippe would have to meet the beast on its own terms, or not at all.

Twice she spotted soft dents where the lion had set the child down, getting a better grip on its kill. By now the beast must have shaken the dogs. The feeding site would not be far off.

A little farther on she found it, a blood-spattered bowl of matted grass. Aganippe dismounted, holding tight to the spear. She found a hank of honey-brown hair and some chewed bone splinters. Saying a prayer to the Black-faced Mistress, she wrapped them in a square of leather, stuffing it into her jacket so the Hetman could bury what was left of his granddaughter.

Standing up, she stared about, seeing only swaying grass tops. Her best chance of finishing this quickly was fading. Lions liked to lie up after a meal, usually close to the feeding site, fearing almost nothing and perhaps anticipating a second helping. But this meal was pitifully small, and the lion had been attacked in the act of taking it. No reasons to linger. And now there would be no blood spoor to follow.

Seizing her mare's stiff upright mane, she swung onto her saddle-cloth, making a slow circuit to pick up the trail.

She found a depression where the lion might have lain up. Otherwise nothing. No claw prints. No pug marks. Not so much as a scat.

She took her bearings from the sun, finding she was well to the west of the lagger. If this was a male on the move he might keep heading that way. Aganippe followed the sinking sun on a zigzag course, casting about for sign. All she saw were hump-backed burial *kurgans* rising out of the dun-colored steppe.

Her search ended at the east bank of the Amazon, the broad gray flood cutting through the Sea of Grass between the Dnieper and the Volga, emptying into the Black Sea. Furs, gold, slaves, and amber all flowed down the Amazon, headed for sale in Sinope, Troy, and Tyre — maritime cities so far to the south that if you were to show a Cimmerian a ship's oar he could not name it, or guess what it was for.

Lazy smoke rose from farmsteads along the river, where dutiful peat-eating peasants labored alongside their oxen. There was no reason for the lion to cross, but perhaps the beast got thirsty. The scent of the river carried for miles. She rode north, then south along the narrow bank, looking for lion sign. Finding nothing but a small cattle trail. The second time she crossed the cattle trail she noted fresh chariot marks in the wet sand. Between the wheel marks was a bare footprint twice the size of hers.

The spring sun sank on the far side of the Amazon. Even if she somehow found her child-killer now, she would be no match for a lion at

night. Tomorrow she would try backtracking. Getting down, she walked her horse toward the Shrine. A warm black drizzle blew up from the south, melting the last of the snow. Wet grass tops whipped at her hips. Near to dawn she heard lions calling — a local pride hunting. She took it as a lucky omen.

The Lion Shrine's stockade and wooden tower stood tall and dark above the predawn steppe. Temple bells tinkled on the dawn wind. Walking her mare through the stockade gate, Aganippe found the rammed earth *maidan* nearly deserted — only those who cared the most had stayed up to see her safe.

Hippodameia, the horse tamer, fed a low dung fire, looking on as an Enaree fortune teller twisted and untwisted strips of lime bark. A teenage novice named Eohippe played with a pair of orphaned cubs, watched over by Kali, an aged lioness with a crooked front foot. Kali was too crippled and toothless to be the child-killer, though Aganippe had once seen the grim old girl gum a hapless intruder half to death.

Both Eohippe and Horsetamer wore stagskin pants and loose leather jackets — though Hippodameia was at the age when she should give up horsetaming, don a bell-shaped dress, and retire to the Inner Shrine. Only the Enaree wore full feminine attire, a tall headdress, dangling jade earrings, and a flounced skirt with a silk-embroidered bodice, padded to enhance the hips and bosom.

Young restless eyes saw her first. Setting down her cubs, Eohippe leaped to her feet, taking the mare's reins and greeting Aganippe with a shy smile, offering a massage — "If you wish."

Horsetamer called to the novice to feed and water the mare. "Give her a grass rubdown and a warm stall. I'll do the massage."

Throwing off her jacket, Aganippe sat down by the dung fire. Hippodameia settled in behind her, taking hold of her tight stiff shoulders. Horsetamer knew every aching fold by heart; as she kneaded, she called out instructions to Eohippe — how best to rub the mare, what sort of feed to give her, which stalls had fresh hay.

Horsetamer's hands worked their way down Aganippe's spine to the tops of her buttocks. In summers past she had given many such massages. Only then both of them had lain naked in Horsetamer's warm loft above the stables, lulled by sunshine and the drowsy smell of green hay and horse

dung. Hippodameia would press hard with her haunches, her hands stroking Aganippe's nipples, thighs rubbing bare hips, lips nibbling at the nape of her neck, until the girl rolled over and gave herself completely. But that was summers ago. These days Horsetamer's hands stayed on her back.

"How did it go?" asked Horsetamer, her thumbs putting parallel pressure along the coccyx.

Aganippe gave a tired grunt, "Terrible."

"How terrible?"

"Someone has eaten a Hetman's granddaughter, and I lost the trail." Botching the track was going to bring no end of trouble, starting with a hard day of backtracking on the morrow.

The Enaree smirked, fingering a necklace of colored Egyptian glass. "What does a nomad call it when a cow pisses on his leg?"

Aganippe said nothing. Horsetamer answered for her, "What *does* a nomad call it when his cow pisses on him?"

"A bath."

Eohippe laughed, but Aganippe had heard it before. And she no longer found it funny — not after seeing the Cimmerian's rage. The Lion Shrine could suffer the same fate as Artemis' Tauric temple. Marauding Greeks fired the temple and made off with the virgin priestess, avenging some imagined insult. The Taurians had since found it prudent to placate the goddess by sacrificing any Greek landing among them.

Aganippe merely asked, "Where are the prides?"

"Brave Pride is at Lion's Rest," Horsetamer told her. "Tawny Pride has returned to the Shrine — they must have had a successful hunt. Dawn Pride is on the eastern steppe. Goddess Pride has not been spotted since three days ago at dusk. None were seen anywhere near the nomad camps."

Aganippe nodded. Very normal. Lions were surprisingly shy around people. There had not been a killing like this since she was a girl, and that one had followed a lion hunt. The Shrine had successfully kept the peace between men and lions.

"We should offer up a big dawn sacrifice," she decided, "to draw in the lions. Cyme and Phoebe can take the novices out and look for Goddess Pride." Cyme and Phoebe were the other Moon Maids dedicated to the Shrine. "I'll do the backtrack."

Having assigned herself the hardest task, Aganippe asked the Enaree, "What does the lime bark say?"

The fortune teller kept twining the bark strips back and forth between long delicate fingers. The Enaree's painted lips parted, showing pearl-white teeth. "Pray to Apia."

Aganippe nodded her thanks, hiding a twinge of guilt. Since girlhood she had gladly served Our Lady of the Beasts, the Hearth Maiden who presided over warfare, childhood, and the hunt. Apia, the Snake-tailed Earth Mother, was an uncomfortable reminder that maidenhood did not last forever — just as the Black-faced Mistress reminded mortals of death. But to Aganippe losing the freedom of maidenhood always seemed like a little death. She would rather have called on the Black-faced One.

Eohippe came trotting back from the stables, offering to take over the massage — irreparably cute and aching to be taken seriously. Horsetamer said nothing, her thumbs digging under Aganippe's shoulder blades. The Enaree's red grin grew into a broad smile, accompanied by an exaggerated wink.

How like a man, thought Aganippe.

No intact male could serve the Shrine. The Enaree put on kohl, rouge, and a padded blouse, and had hacked off his privates to please the goddess. But sex was in the head, not in testicles or face paint — and the Enaree saw Eohippe as pathetically available. Aganippe had only to nod and the novice would be out in the long grass, kneeling naked between the Moon Maid's knees. The Enaree could not understand her passing that up.

But when Aganippe looked at Eohippe, she saw herself, six summers ago, hopelessly in love with Horsetamer. And that had ended ill. She was not a calf-stealer. Standing up, she thanked Hippodameia for the back rub, saying it was time to visit the Inner Shrine.

The Inner Shrine was like a burial *kurgan*, dug into the base of the watch tower — flanked by the horse stalls and sweat lodge. She entered through a narrow sloping tunnel paneled with cedar and floored with river stones, smelling of damp earth. Accustomed to flat open steppe and towering sky, Aganippe always associated going underground with death and burial.

Her mother was the Crone doing dawn duty by the altar lamps, wearing her sable robe, serpent belt, and cap of priceless sea pearls. She

greeted Aganippe with a cold glare. A holy silence lay between them, but Mother had seen the massage in the courtyard.

Enough, thought Aganippe. What was the harm in a back rub? With Mother, everything was suspect. Aganippe was an only daughter. Mother had borne four sons, giving them up to their fathers. Beyond childbearing, she now yearned for granddaughters — which Horsetamer could hardly give her. Past reproaches echoed unsummoned in Aganippe's head. "Do you want to end up like Horsetamer? Chasing young girls, with only aging friends and ex-lovers for company?"

Mother did not know the half of it. At Eohippe's age, Aganippe wanted desperately to *be* Horsetamer — competent, independent, owing nothing to anyone. She had given herself gratefully to the older woman. Now she was not sure what she wanted.

All she said was, "I must sleep the Dream Sleep."

Mother nodded. As Dawn Crone she presided over that small death. "Who will you pray to?"

"To Mother Apia." Aganippe thought she detected a thin smile of triumph, though her mother tried never to let personal feelings intrude on ritual.

The Mother on duty woke her maiden daughter, a sleepy girl of seven. Fortunately for the girl, the Maiden's part was minor, but Maiden-Mother-Crone — the three ages of women — had to be there for the magic to hold. To insure the Goddess was constantly served, three Maidens, three Mothers, and three Crones were always in residence at the Shrine, plus the Moon Maids, and a dozen or so girls, novices, and attendants — making a score of women overall. They lived off the hunt and a temple tax paid in wheat and marmot skins.

The women stripped her. Standing naked before the horned altar, Aganippe struggled to stay awake, murmuring prayers she had recited since girlhood, while they painted her body with yellow ochre — the earth color.

To keep alert, she imagined her sainted mother, high priestess and seer, with her dress up, making heel marks in the sod while some passing stranger — perhaps a youthful version of the Cimmerian Hetman — heaved and sweated atop her. It was impossible to picture, particularly on an empty stomach. But that was where she had come from. They had

Mother Apia's word on that. Why couldn't an almighty goddess have devised a more dignified way to bear daughters?

They fed her honey cakes and mare's milk, then led her naked out of the womb-like shrine. Mother put her finger to her lips, signing for everyone to observe the holy silence.

Knowing what would be needed, Horsetamer had stoked the fire, rolling rocks onto the coals. Using a brass dish, Eohippe and the Enaree carried the red hot stones into the sweat lodge, a skin wickiup stretched over a willow frame. Entering the lodge, Aganippe lay down beside the glowing stones piled in a central pit. Immediately she began to sweat.

Mother cast big green hemp buds sticky with resin on the rocks. The hemp burst into flames and intoxicating smoke filled the sweat lodge. Aganippe drank it in through her nostrils. Then came the water, thrown hissing over the hemp. Steam blotted out everything, a white drugged fog, filling her lungs, seeping into her pores.

Thoroughly exhausted, Aganippe closed her eyes, and was instantly asleep. The hemp and her lack of sleep had her dreaming almost at once. Everything from the day got mixed together. Her mother was there, as was Horsetamer, and the Cimmerian Hetman. They tried to get her to mount a bed-like funeral bier, making a place for her beside the Hetman's dead son. Mother told her, "Goddess knows, he's not much — but he can give me granddaughters."

"Grandsons," the Hetman corrected her.

"Twins," suggested Horsetamer.

Aganippe recoiled from the dead son's ghoulish embrace. Leaping from the bier, she ran across the steppe, pursued by a huge shadowy figure. She headed for Hylaea, Apia's wooded home. The Snake-tailed Mother came out of her tree-shaded cave, supported by twin serpent tails in place of legs. She was leading a fine pair of mares and a small herd of red cattle. "Why are you running?" hissed Apia. Aganippe tried to explain, but the Earth Mother merely told her, "Seek the Lion Man," pointing a scaly tail at Aganippe's hulking pursuer. Turning about, Aganippe finally got a look at the man who was chasing her. His body was huge and handsome — but he had a lion's face.

She awoke with an aching head. The sweat lodge was cold and empty. She wormed her way through the entrance flap, then staggered to her feet,

blinded by the daylight, her body still yellow and naked, scrawled with power signs.

Horsetamer was waiting, with the Enaree. So was her mother and Eohippe. Had they slept? Only Horsetamer looked rested, but she regularly slept early in the evening, to be up at dawn with the horses.

"Did you dream?" Mother asked, bringing her a basin to wash in.

"More than I wanted to," Aganippe admitted, wincing at the cold wash water, thinking about the part where they tried to mate her to a corpse.

Mother laid out boots, trousers, a shirt, and a red-leather jacket trimmed with horsehair. "What did Apia advise?"

"Seek the Lion Man," Aganippe replied, pulling on the stag-leather pants, hairside in for warmth. She scanned the ring of faces for signs of recognition. No one had a notion who the Lion Man might be — except maybe the Enaree, who smirked for a moment, then got up and left.

Tying off her trousers, she stood half-naked, letting the morning sun warm her wet breasts. "Have Cyme and Phoebe gone out?"

Horsetamer nodded. "They left while you slept."

"Did they take the gazehounds?"

Horsetamer shook her head.

"Then get them ready." Last night's rain had drowned the scent, but gazehounds did not need their noses to hunt. She pulled on the doeskin shirt, and the red-leather riding jacket. She had been to the sweat lodge and gotten her dream. Now it was time to act. This killer needed to be brought to bay soon — or not at all.

"I have saddled four horses," Horsetamer told her, then went off to see to the hounds.

Four horses meant two riders. Eohippe got up eagerly. "Take me." The other novices were off with Cyme and Phoebe, searching for Goddess Pride.

Aganippe struggled into her boots, then went to inspect the horses. Eohippe tagged hopefully after her. Horsetamer had saddled Aganippe's favorite mount, a zebra dun, with dark stripes on her legs and withers, also a big clayback gelding, and a pair of roans. The blaze-faced roan was Horsetamer's.

Hanging her bow, quiver, and mirror case on the mare, she mounted the big gelding, meaning to keep her best horse fresh.

Horsetamer returned with the hounds — a half-dozen lean powerful creatures, with long legs and deep chests, bred from Abyssinian wolves, and perfect for hunting in open steppe where prey cannot be stalked and must be caught. Their eyes were as keen as a bloodhound's nose, and they could run down the fleetest prey, turning, dodging, able to out-distance a cheetah if the need arose. She cinched their feed bag behind her.

Taking up the Hetman's spear, she told Horsetamer, "I won't need the roans."

Eohippe's face fell. Horsetamer handed up the mare's drag rope. Their fingers touched. "You should not go looking for this lion alone."

"Oh, I'm not alone." The Moon Maid shook her head. "I have the dogs. And Mother Apia will be with me." Horsetamer looked hurt. So did Eohippe. But Aganippe wanted to face down this lion on her own, with the least amount of helpful interference. An only daughter, she had been brought up to rely on herself — it was too late to change that now.

The Enaree ambled up, bidding her to wait.

"You too?" Aganippe raised an eyebrow. The transvestite's dress was not even slit for riding. She might as well take Mother.

He-she laughed. "Oh, no. The lime bark says this is going to be far too adventurous. But I have something you'll need." The Enaree held up an evil-looking goatskin bag tied together by the hooves. It smelled of wine.

Aganippe tried to refuse. "I won't be drinking."

"All the better," replied the Enaree. "It's not for you."

She shrugged and took the goatskin, wondering how wine was going to help her find her lion. But the Enaree had the farsight — and was tolerated because of it.

Aganippe called to the lead bitch, a hound named Havoc. They all had fast, easy-to-call names, like Hasty, Blazer, Ripper, and Impulse. Then she set out through the stockade gate, with the pack trotting at her heels. A hot wind blew up to meet her, making it hard to believe that three nights ago it had snowed.

She swung wide to check on the prides. Tawny Pride was scattered south of the Shrine, sleeping off their kill. The dawn sacrifice of a fat bullock had brought Brave Pride in from Lion's Rest. And on the eastern steppe she met up with a pair of lionesses from Dawn Pride, Eos and Daybreak, along with a young male named Helius. Only Goddess Pride

had not been heard from — but it was up to Cyme and Phoebe to find them.

When she got to the kill site, the wagon lagger was gone. But the Cimmerians had not headed back to the north country — no such luck. Their yurt tracks went west, toward the Amazon.

She let the hounds run over the blood spoor and lion prints, so the pack would know what they were after. Then they set out upstream, looking for some sign of where the lion had come from. Cats are territorial creatures. The lion was apt to circle back. Or Aganippe might get some clue as to the killer's identity.

But all she saw was mile after mile of empty stream mud. Disheartened, she struck out over the steppe. By now the sun was high up, and the vast grassy plain seemed nine parts sky. Herds of red deer and antelope grazed in the distance. The only lion sign she spotted was a rest, where a traveling pride had stopped to sleep out the day. Which pride it was, she could not say. Suddenly the dogs began jumping about. Havoc loped off, then came racing back. Aganippe loosed the pack, to see what they had found.

It was another kill site. Grass had been torn and trampled in a big irregular circle. At the center lay the remains of a great red cow or ox. Horns, hooves, tendons, hair and scraps of hide were strewn all about. Lions had been feeding. Hyenas too — their white dung was everywhere. Vultures stalked in and out of an empty rib cage.

Getting down on her knees, Aganippe reconstructed the kill. It was the work of a fair-sized pride. The lions had surprised a small herd of cattle, cutting out a single victim. The terrified beast had spun back and forth, trying to shake its tormentors. Working together, the lions kept the ox boxed in, finally managing to bring it down.

But the pride had paid for its meal. One of the lions was hurt, and lay on its side for some time, then limped off ahead of the hyenas — favoring its left forepaw.

The dogs began leaping about again. Aganippe looked up. A slow lurching movement caught her attention. A two-horse chariot was coming toward her over the steppe, with no horses in the traces — seemingly moving by itself.

Standing up, she saw the chariot was being pulled by a man, plodding purposefully along with the chariot pole across one shoulder. Despite the

weight of the chariot, the man kept up a steady ground-eating pace, as though he had come a long way, but would keep on walking until he got where he was going. He was a big black-bearded titan, stark naked from the chest down, carelessly swinging a brass bound club in one huge hand. He wore nothing but a giant lionskin cloak, with the forepaws draped over his shoulder, and the tail and hindpaws dangling behind him. The lion's maned head formed a hood, framing the man's face with its grinning teeth.

The Lion Man

NEVER HAVING SEEN the like, the Moon Maid watched man and chariot lurch toward her. Her hounds ran out to meet the intruder, but the man barked at them and they came bounding back.

At the edge of the kill site he set down the chariot pole, stepping out of the traces. Fully erect, clad only in his lion skin, he stood over four cubits barefoot. Aganippe had seen taller men — though not by much — but never anyone bigger. He had arms as thick as her thighs, and legs like temple pillars. Eohippe could have lain across his chest and shoulders, with only her head and toes showing. His eyes were light amber, like a lion's.

Giving Aganippe a jaunty greeting, he claimed he was a god-son and that his name was Hercules.

"I saw the vultures circling and came right over." He professed an affinity for vultures. "They are always a lucky omen, being the most pious of birds, never harming anything living."

Aganippe had seen vultures do a good deal of harm to things that had not yet managed to die, but she sensed this was not the time to argue ornithology.

Hercules shook out a short doric tunic that had been folded on his shoulder to pad the chariot pole. He pinned the simple square of woven cloth at the shoulder, then belted it at the waist with a length of rope, leaving the right side open. The lion tail dangling between his legs was knotted in the middle.

"Have you seen my chariot mares?" he asked. "A matched pair, given to me by Poseidon."

Aganippe told him she had not seen any god-given horses.

"Then how about the cattle of Geryon? Big red shambling beasts — very beautiful?" Without waiting for an answer Hercules launched into the tale of how he had lifted the cattle from King Geryon of Tartessus who lived at the far end of the world, beside the Ocean stream. Or rather *had* lived. Hercules had been forced to kill King Geryon, along with the king's herdsman and a wondrous two-headed watch dog.

He had been ordered to commit this larceny and homicide by the High King of Mycenae, a Greek with no particular claim to the cattle, who was in the habit of sending Hercules hither and yon to lift or kill all manner of famous wonders. Giant boars to fetch, eight-headed hydras to kill, stables to clean — it made no difference to Hercules. The harder the better.

"All that matters to me is that this is my tenth and last labor. Drive these wandering cattle down to Mycenae, and I'm done — when I find them."

"You've found one," Aganippe held up a scrap of hide from the kill site; long red hair still hung from it.

Hercules swore mightily — not a formal oath, but a string of Greek expletives. Listening to him, Aganippe could hardly believe Mother Apia would saddle her with this ox-sized oaf. But who else could this be but the Lion Man? Fit punishment for clinging stubbornly to maidenhood.

"There is nothing to do but search for the others," Hercules decided. Seizing the drag rope on her gelding, he hauled the big clayback over to his chariot. Without so much as a "by-your-leave" he was appropriating her horses.

Aganippe went along with him, bringing over her zebra dun, and helping secure both horses in the traces. Even on short acquaintance she guessed that quibbling over ownership with Hercules was a good way to end up as dead as Geryon and his two-headed watch dog. Besides, having no notion where her lion had gone, it would be plain idiocy to deny an omen from Mother Apia, no matter how unpleasantly packaged.

Hercules made room for her aboard the chariot, which was loaded with a pair of bows and a collection of oversized armor — gifts from various gods.

"Apollo gave me the bows, and Hermes the sword. The helmet, cuirass, and shield are all Hephaestus' work, totally unbreakable. Can't

imagine why they thought I would need them. Mostly sentiment, I suppose — wanting to see me off well. We gods are greathearted to a fault." He clearly considered himself the greatest thing since the Hittites sacked Babylon.

Hercules whipped her horses and they were off, following the cattle trail away from the kill site. The cattle had scattered when the lions attacked, but soon the little herd had bunched together again, plowing through the long leaves of grass, leaving a clear trail. If the pride came back for another taste of Geryon's cattle, Aganippe might get a clue to her killer.

As they bounced along, Hercules regaled her with a description of his last and greatest labor. He had gone all the way to Spain to get the cattle, pausing to set up the pillars that marked the entrance to the Ocean stream — modestly naming them for his favorite deity. "Pillars of Hercules has a handsome ring," he confessed.

He had returned by way of Gaul, Italy and Sicily — this was all undiscovered country, and Hercules was having difficulty finding his way back to Greece. "At the head of the Adriatic the herd was stampeded by a gadfly. I tracked them across Thrace to here. Then yesterday morning I awoke to find my chariot mares missing as well. A lesser god would have given up."

Or hobbled his horses better — but Aganippe did not say that. Hercules took her silence for mute agreement.

Musing over his lost mares put him in mind of the two horses he had taken from her. "Fine mounts — though not to be compared to a gift of Poseidon. But nice come upon, just when I needed a new team." It was the first time he had shown the least curiosity about why Aganippe happened to be out wandering the steppe. She told him about her lion troubles, ending with her most recent conclusion — that the child-killer with a crooked foot had been lamed by his lost cattle.

Hercules told her she was in luck. "You won't find a mightier lion-killer." He boasted that before he was out of his teens he had killed the lion of Cithaeron — "Taking time out from the hunt to deflower the fifty daughters of King Thespius. A greater task than any ten lions." In fact, he feared he might have missed one of the daughters, lying with only forty-nine, leaving one still a virgin. "The main drawback to mass deflowering is the tendency to lose count. You end up relying on a bunch of giggling virgins to keep track."

He had killed another memorable lion near Thebes, but the pelt on his back came from the Nemean lion. "Whose skin was proof against stone, iron, or bronze. I had to strangle him barehanded — costing me a finger."

Hercules held up his left hand as proof. The little finger was bitten off just above the knuckle. "Lions are nothing."

Not to Aganippe. For all of her life lions and horses had been just about everything. Now she had lost her horses to this big buffoon — and she still had a lion to kill.

Hercules sensed he had not cheered her. "Really, I will kill your lion. Throughout my labors, I've taken on extra tasks — to show the King of Mycenae he does not own me. I subdued Gaul and Thrace, and sailed with the Argonauts. I would have found the Golden Fleece, if Calais and Zetes had not talked Jason into abandoning me."

The cattle trail led south, past humped burial mounds covered over with wild wheat and blue coneflowers. At dusk, Aganippe made out a thin dark line in the distance. "That is the forest of Hylaea," she told Hercules, "Mother Apia's sacred wood." It was the only sizeable tract of woodland along the lower Amazon.

Not even a demigod cared to track cattle through the woods at night, so they set up camp. Unhitching her mare, Aganippe went out with the dog pack, running down several hares and a big ground-dwelling bustard. She rewarded the hounds with treats from their meal bag — dried barley bread dipped in blood — keeping the kills for herself. Hares and bustards are not the best fare for gazehounds. And Hercules showed every sign of being hard to feed.

He started a fire, and happily gutted the kills, while Aganippe gave her horse and hounds a rubdown. Hercules singed the bustard to get off the feathers, then buried the carcass under the coals to bake. Skinning the hares, he stuck them on a spit, saying, "Today I'm hungry. But normally I do not stoop to rabbit hunting. It is fine to hunt boars and wild bulls, or man-killing lions and wolves — but what harm do little rabbits do?"

Hercules had discovered her wineskin, and pouring it into his empty stomach was making him tenderhearted.

He told her that since crossing the Amazon (which he called the Tanais) he was anxious to reach the next river over — "Which runs into the world-circling Ocean. Then I will have gone from one end of the world to the other."

Here she had to disappoint him, explaining that the Volga (which he called the Rha) did not flow into Ocean, but emptied into the landlocked Hyrcanian Sea. Hercules was a long way from world's end.

Hearing this, he grew morose, drinking more and musing about all the people who were jealous of his deeds, or just plain hated him. By his own admission, he had enemies by the score. Hera, his foster mother, hated him. Calais and Zetes got him kicked off the Argo. Complete strangers took it amiss when he came to clean their stables, lift their livestock, or just slaughter some wondrous creature that lived nearby. His own cousin, the King of Mycenae, sent him on these impossible labors. "And if I so much as stray for a moment, his herald the Dung Man appears with new demands. Bring me Aphrodite's silver nightie, and a Moon rock for my garden, or something equally useful."

Aganippe made the mistake of asking why he was put to these labors. Hercules heaved a sigh, "They are a penance."

"For what?"

"I killed my children. Not all of them — that would be impossible. Just six sons that I had by the King of Thebes' daughter. And a couple of bystanders. I'm not proud of it. I was mad at the time, and mistook them for Minyans."

He took several swallows of wine, which seemed to cheer him. Then he looked her over, his eyes bright and happy. "But I'm much better now. And after we have eaten these hares we shall enjoy each other, and feel even better." Hercules explained that he was partial to Amazons. "I prefer a woman of spirit, and have little use for law myself. I fuck when I please, and fight when I must — though gods and men often take it amiss."

Aganippe knew she should slide gracefully out of his clutches, but she lacked the knack for fawning. Instead she said she would sooner mate with one of Geryon's lost oxen.

He laughed. "Don't be modest. I know you've wanted me. Amazons always do. It's my muscles. When I came to fetch Queen Hippolyte's girdle she was in a fever to get it off. We had marvelous sport, and it was the merest mischance that I had to kill her afterwards."

Aganippe did not demand details. She sat in silence, furiously weighing her chances of surviving dinner. It was plainly suicidal to deny him anything. God or mortal. Mad or sober. Death followed Hercules about as

diligently as his King's herald, the Dung Man. He killed people in battles and single combats, as well as in athletic contests, acts of larceny, and simple drunken accidents. He killed to administer rough justice, and in contrite compensation for previous killings, also in fits of madness and chance encounters. And not just people. By his account he had killed lions, serpents, centaurs, bulls, bears, and brazen-winged birds. Not to mention titans, gorgons, three-headed shepherds and unnamed six-armed monsters. Whole districts had been depopulated, and many marvelous species turned to myth by his arrows and brass bound club.

Nor was Aganippe under the dangerous illusion that she had half a hope of standing up to him, much less talking him out of it. He was like a force of nature, and his quiver was an open grave. She'd have a better chance of saying "no" to a cyclone.

Her sole hope was that Hercules was already half shot on the Enaree's wine, and would be slow to act. Trust a fortune teller to know what would be needed.

He tipped back the wineskin, wetting his beard as he drank. She leaped up and ran, sprinting over the darkening steppe like a nomad fleeing a bath.

Aganippe had no notion of where she was going, just aiming to be gone — to get lost in the long grass. It was that or end up as dead as Geryon and Hippolyte. The hounds must have thought it was a chase, because they came bounding up. She yelled for them to be gone, to go back to camp, but they kept bumping at her heels and dashing on ahead.

Hearing Hercules call to her, she redoubled her efforts, damning the stupid dogs. How could she hide with them frisking about? Then she remembered the Hylaea Wood, and made for it, with the hounds pelting after her. Her best hope was to somehow lose him in the dark wood, dogs or no.

Something clipped her foot. She went down, sure she had stumbled over a hound. But when she tried to rise, her leg would not hold her.

"Here, let me help you." Hercules stood over her, flushed with wine, but not even breathing hard. He had easily run her down. Jerking her to her feet, he twisted her arms behind her, binding her wrists with the rope he used for a belt. "It was foolish to run. Calais and Zetes were sons of the North Wind, but they could not outrun my vengeance."

He hoisted her onto his shoulder, taking up the club he had thrown to bring her down.

She kicked at his head with her good leg — finding it as solid as an oak — calling him a soused clown and a three-legged ass.

"No need to play the coy Corinthian," he told her, striding back to camp with the hounds at his heels. "If you have the misfortune to be a virgin, you could not hope for a better start. I never resort to rape, since women find me irresistible. Once they see there is no escape, they learn to love it, or at least stop struggling. None of King Thespius' fifty daughters had cause to complain — unless it was the one I missed."

Tossing her into the chariot alongside his bows and armor, he took another swig from the wineskin, then went to dig up the bustard.

Bent double, the Moon Maid massaged her numb leg with her bound hands. A cold dull moon drifted overhead. She prayed to it. Dying to protect her honor would help no one — not the Shrine, not the lions, and least of all her. But giving in to Hercules was no better. Queen Hippolyte had, and ended up as dead as if she had denied him.

She looked frantically about. With her hands tied and one leg lamed she had no chance to flee or fight. Her weapons were by the fire. So was Hercules' sword. The chariot held only his armor and bows — and his quiver.

Pushing off with her good leg, she edged up to the chariot rail, where her bound hands could reach the quiver. Hercules' arrows were inside.

Back by the fire, Hercules had finished the bustard and was hard at work on the rabbits. Between bites he regaled Aganippe with tales of his conquests — each exploit reminding him of another. Well into his cups, he had trouble telling myth from legend. The Lernaean Hydra now had nine heads, one of them immortal. The fifty nights he spent with King Thespius' daughters became a single dusk to dawn debauch.

Her own debauch was moments away — but mention of the Hydra reminded Aganippe that the arrows were dipped in the dead beast's poisonous gall. One of Hercules' regrettable accidents had concerned a thumb-fingered centaur who scratched himself handling Hercules' arrows — dying in unspeakable agony. Muttering a prayer to the All Mother, she slowly drew an arrow out. If Apia meant for her to die, it might as well be now.

Reversing the arrow, her hands crept down the shaft to the point, her

fingers closing on the head. Holding it sideways, she sawed at the rope, knowing a single prick would end all her troubles.

A heavy hand shook the chariot. Her fingers froze, and she looked up. Hercules stared down at her, grinning so wide she could count his teeth. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting myself in the hands of the Mother." She felt the rope part behind her.

"Oh, it won't be that bad," he assured her. "But do eat first, you'll want the energy." Hercules had saved the last hare for her — undersized, overcooked, and badly chewed about by the hounds.

She turned her head away. "I'm hardly hungry."

Hercules shrugged and took a bite himself, spitting out small bones, saying she was not entering into the spirit of the evening. He strolled cheerfully back to his fire and wineskin. Had he not been maudlin drunk, he might already have made swift work of her.

She let the arrow fall, rolling off the tail of the chariot. One leg was still dead weight, but she pushed herself into the grass with her good one, wriggling away from the bright circle cast by the fire. When she lost sight of the fire, she had to take her bearings from the stars. Finding the Great Bear, she kept the North Star over her shoulder, crawling toward the wood, impossibly far off but still her only shelter.

A bellow came from behind her. She dived down beneath the grass stalks. Hercules had found the chariot empty, reproachfully calling her name. Aganippe was not the least tempted to answer.

He strode out onto the grass, calling as he came. "Come, enough of this nonsense. I've eaten and am ready for bed."

She burrowed deeper, down to where the grass roots trap wet warm air. Closing her eyes, she laid her cheek against the earth, listening to his footfalls getting closer. She could hear him thirty paces off. Then twenty. Then ten. Then two.

He was close enough to touch. Holding her breath, she heard him muttering at the unreliability of women — "Always about and underfoot, except when you want one."

Hercules stepped closer, his bare foot coming down between her head and her hand. Another drunken lurch and he would be on her. He sniffed aloud, like a male lion searching for the scent of a lioness. She prayed again to Apia.

His voice boomed over her. "You'll catch your death in this wet grass. Let me warm you."

"Hercules..." The answer to his call came drifting on the dark wind like some lost ghost. "...Mi-ght-y Hercules."

She felt him stiffen. "What? Where?" he demanded.

"Here, Hercules." The words were somewhere between a whisper and a moan — but it was a woman's voice, as clear as a night bird, with a hint of longing, a touch of anticipation.

"I'm coming," he bellowed. The leg next to her head took off, headed south. His footfalls faded rapidly, along with the voice calling his name.

Aganippe released her breath, daring to move again. Drawing herself into a ball, she began to rub feeling back into her numb leg. Now she was utterly alone. Without food. Or weapons. Barely able to crawl. In splendid shape to tackle a lion.

Nor was that the worst. What came next would be up to the vengeful Hetman and his merry band of Cimmerians. He would sack the shrine, and have her skin for a door flap — if she had not already been beaten to pulp for refusing rape. Night chill crept down the grass stalks, invading her nest. Tired of kneading her leg, she slept.

Near to dawn she was awakened by a stiff warm body nuzzling up to her. She nearly shrieked, thinking Hercules had her. But the body was smaller than her, and another was behind her as well. And at her feet, and above her head. The dogs had found her. They were not used to sleeping without human companionship. At the Shrine each hound had a girl or novice to sleep with — to keep mange and worms from spreading through the pack. They had cast about in the darkness until one stumbled on her, then cuddled as close to her as they could.

She drifted off again.

"Wake up. The sun is high."

Aganippe jerked alert, giving a strangled gasp. She was still lying in a tangle of dogs, but sunlight streamed down on her. The day was already hot, and Hercules stood over her, like some huge waking nightmare, looking offensively cheery.

"Breakfast is ready. Time to eat and break camp." He was happily holding up "breakfast," a dead cobra, thick as her arm and dangling almost to the ground, with enough venom in its fangs to drop a charging rhino.

Warily she tested her leg, finding it would hold.

Hercules was in his normal asinine good humor. Making no reference to last night's attempt at rape and mayhem, he launched into another of his never ending stories, telling how the cobra had foolishly crawled under his lionskin as he slept, looking for warmth.

"The snake did not know that I strangled cobras in my crib. When I was only eight months, or maybe a year. Two of them. Sent to kill me by some jealous god or goddess. Or maybe my stepfather." Even as a toddler, members of his family had been hoping to rid themselves of this monster.

Grimly she got to her feet, following him back to camp, her dogs bounding along beside them. Hercules had a fire going, and merrily cut chunks off the cobra, sliding them onto his spit.

"Did you hear her?"

"Hear who?" Snake sizzled on the fire.

"The woman or goddess who called my name. I spent half the night searching for her. But females can be damned elusive in the dark." He stripped steaming meat from the spit with bare fingers, making room for more.

"It was Mother Apia." Aganippe tasted the cobra, finding it surprisingly succulent, barely remembering when she had last eaten. "Hylaea is her wood." She nodded at the dark line at the southern edge of the steppe.

Wiping greasy fingers on his thighs, Hercules told her, "Cook the rest of this cobra, while I harness the horses. We shall see about these woods."

She was no longer surprised by the easy way he ordered her about, not after he had stolen her horses, tried to assault her, and all but broken her leg. What really amazed her was that some irate victim, relative, or stock owner had not put a spear through him ages ago. The answer of course was that hundreds, even thousands had tried, with small sign of success.

Well, all *she* wanted was her lion. The gods could have the thankless task of putting an end to Hercules, or at very least mending his beastly manners. She whistled up the pack, and they set out, chewing on roast snake.

The cattle trail led straight to the woods. Hercules tethered the chariot to one of the first trees, a dwarf almond at the edge of the steppe, then they entered the holy wood, looking for cattle tracks on the forest floor. Here the rolling steppe had turned hilly, trapping water, allowing

the trees to grow. The forest got darker and thicker. Dwarf almond and wild apple gave way to stands of birch and oak. At the brink of a broad stream the hounds stopped and lifted their heads, looking about. Wind rustled the upper branches.

Aganippe heard a low moaning, "Hercules. Hercules, come here. I want you..."

"Hear that!" Hercules boomed.

She nodded, shifting her spear. The words seemed to come from rising ground to the right. They set off after the sound.

Dense thickets along the stream gave way to open parkland, beneath a wide oak canopy. Through the gnarled limbs Aganippe saw two great rounded folds of earth, with a dark cleft between them, topped by a tuft of trees and brush. It did not take any imagination to picture rounded thighs flanking a stone slit, topped by thatched pubes — Mother Apia's grotto.

The wind sighing Hercules' name issued from the gap between the two hilly thighs. Aganippe knew enough of caverns to guess this was completely unnatural. Breezes don't blow out of caves, since the air underground is absolutely still — but then winds don't usually call out to obnoxious god-sons either.

Telling the hounds to wait, she followed Hercules into the dark stony womb.

The cavern sloped downward past walls smoothed over with plaster, like corridors in an underground palace. The rocky floor turned into flagged stonework. Ahead she could see the glow of lamplight, falling on a fresco of griffins grappling with lions. Along with the light came the splash of water on stone, the whisper of invisible servants, and the strumming of a lyre played by phantom fingers.

The passage opened on a handsome Megaron, a temple hall supported by tall round columns. A basin and fountain faced a lively mural of mares giving birth. In the center lay a circular stone hearth, glowing with coals. Otherwise the hall seemed bare, with no stands of weapons, no stools, no cedar chests. None of the gold bric-a-brac great lords display to impress their guests.

At the far end of the hall, Mother Apia sat waiting on an ivory couch trimmed with gold and iron, beside a silver table topped with a jar of wine and a bowl of sweetmeats. Apia looked just like she had in Aganippe's dream. She had the head, arms and torso of a woman, a strikingly beautiful

woman, with wide hips, proud round breasts, a finely chiseled face, and midnight black hair — but her legs from the thighs down were long serpent tails that twined about the flagstone floor.

Behind her stood a stock pen and stalls containing a small herd of shambling blood-red cattle, and a pair of fine chariot mares with speed stamped on every line.

Aganippe prostrated herself before the Mother.

Hercules gave a happy snort, having lost none of his usual strut and swagger. He told the goddess, "I'll trouble you for those mares and cattle," not in the least daunted to take on Mother Apia in her own den.

"You may have them," Apia replied, "if you are man enough. Are you as mighty in the simple things as you are in amazing deeds?"

Hercules laughed. "I can spit straight and fart like thunder, if that is what you mean."

Mother Apia took the tips of her tails and ran them over the curves of her torso. "If you have the strength and daring to get me with child, you can have your cattle and horses."

For once he looked taken aback, staring at her two slithering tails. Apia laughed, mocking him the way he had mocked Aganippe. "Don't be modest. You know you've wanted me."

Hearing his own words thrown back at him, Hercules recovered some of his accustomed bluster, saying, "It is my last labor, and I dare anything."

Aganippe stayed prostrate before the snake goddess, mildly disgusted by the divine flirtation, but glad to see some of the brag and bounce taken out of Hercules.

Apia turned to her, touching the tip of one tail to her lips. "Welcome, my wayward maiden daughter — the Moon Maid who never wants to be a mother. You are a disobedient child, willful to an extreme."

With her nose pressed to the floor, Aganippe apologized, telling the goddess she did not mean to be wayward, or disobedient.

"Then you must learn to accept life," Apia warned her. "You grow up. You grow old. And you die. Do not deny it."

"I do not deny it," she replied.

Apia seemed appeased. "You brought me the Lion Man. In return I will guide you to your lion. Follow the stream that runs before this cave, and you will find what you seek."

Aganippe thanked the Snake-tailed Mother, gladly backing out of her presence. She was never at her best underground, and she had no desire to witness the divine mating. As she left the cave she felt the ground shake with their coupling.

The pack gathered around her, giving her trusting looks, expecting her to make some sense out of what was happening. She told them to wait by the grotto. In dense woods gazehounds would only be a hindrance. She took a deep breath. Her lamed leg started to hurt. Bending down, she gave it a good rubbing, then set out.

She had hardly gone fifty paces downstream before she spotted the first pug mark on the far bank, crisp and recent, hours old at best, and splayed to the outside.

Seeing that crooked pug mark appear again after so much fruitless searching was like magic, as eerie as anything she had witnessed in Mother Apia's cave. The Snake-tailed Mother had brought all the threads together. Her new lover, Hercules. His god-given mares and Geryon's red cattle. And now her lion. Such was the way of the Mother, Aganippe thought, sending us forth from the womb, then gathering us back to her when we are done.

The ground beneath her rippled again, twitching like a horse's pelt on a hot day. Time to stop gawking at fate and get to tracking.

She pushed through the brush on the far bank, parting the leafy tangle with her spear, keeping her body low, eyes searching for lion-spoor, feeling the natural claustrophobia of a plains dweller confined by trees and brush. As she advanced, the prints grew fresher. She came upon trodden stems still in the act of bending back toward the light. From up ahead came a low undulating call of a lion.

The ground gave another sideways lurch. Apia and Hercules were hard at work, having a heroic coupling.

A light breeze rustled the branches, bringing the unmistakable smell of cat. Her belly tightened and her heart pounded. The killer was nearby, maybe just beyond the next thicket. She stopped to unsling her bow and peel off her leather jacket, lest it catch on a branch. She had to do her thinking now, because a lion charge from close in was nothing but a tawny blur, over in an eyeblink.

Selecting her sturdiest, straightest arrow she entered the brush with her bow half-bent, holding her spear in her left hand alongside the grip.

That way she could get off one shot just by easing back and releasing. Then she would drop the bow and be ready with the spear.

A sharp warning cough sounded somewhere ahead of her, but she was able to see no more than a pace or two into the bracken. She slid forward, peering over the tip of her arrow, knees bent, keeping low. The best place to hit a charging lion was in the chest.

Two steps. Three. Then four. Nothing. Her leg began to throb again. At ten paces the birch thicket gave way to a grassy glen, filled with shifting patches of shade and sunlight.

Then she saw her. A dozen paces away a big lioness lay resting in the shady lee of a wild apple tree. Their eyes met. Instantly they recognized each other. Aganippe's heart sank.

Without lowering her bow she called softly to the lioness, "Goddess, where have you been?"

The lioness did not move, calmly staring back at the arrow. Goddess was the lead female of Goddess Pride — a friend and companion ever since Aganippe was old enough to mix with the lions. They had played and hunted together. Kali, the old lioness at the shrine, was Goddess' mother.

The Moon Maid took another step, leaving the shelter of the thicket, saying in a low even tone, "Have you hurt your leg?"

She was answered by a snarl — not from Goddess, but from another unseen lion somewhere to her left. Her bow stayed frozen, the arrow unwavering. At best she would get one shot, and she did not mean to waste it.

Another sinister rumble came from her right. Aganippe kept her gaze fixed on Goddess, taking another step. "Come on honey, let's see your foot."

She was answered by a low rustle. One by one members of Goddess Pride came flowing out of the shadows. Aganippe recognized Hera, Rhea, Isis, Luna, Nemesis, and the two males in residence, Eros and Ganymede.

Goddess yawned, stretched, and got to her feet. Shaking herself, she came limping over to greet Aganippe. The wound on her left foreleg was still fresh. Skin and muscle had been ripped almost to the bone by a horn from Geryon's red cattle.

The gaping tear told her whole story. Lamed and separated from her pride, she had swung by the nomad camp to grab an easy meal, picking the

child because she was simple to carry. The Hetman's son had been a mere annoyance, neatly disposed of. Neither meant anything. They were strangers to the pride and Shrine. Now Goddess was on the mend, and back with the pride. All was well with her world.

Tears welled up. Aganippe had to blink to keep her eyes from blurring. Goddess had merely made the best of a bad business, taking what she needed, then moving on. From her friendly attitude it was clear she did not connect Aganippe with the nomads. The Moon Maid herself felt more kinship with this pride than with a pack of bothersome Cimmerians who treated her sex like dirt. She thought of the Hetman's woeful, winsome daughter-in-law sitting on the death cart, waiting to be strangled just to adorn her husband's funeral. Goddess had killed for food, not for vanity — yet the Hetman would call what he did piety, and what Goddess did murder.

Aganippe blinked again to clear her vision. Heaving a sigh, she pulled back on the intake, releasing on the exhale. Her shaft shot the short distance between them, hitting the lioness in the right eye.

Goddess had no time to dodge, or even see the arrow coming. She collapsed in a heap, the point driven deep into her brain.

Consternation swept the pride. Lionesses sank down, growling, tails lashing back and forth. With no time to nock another arrow, Aganippe dropped her bow, holding the spear in front of her.

One of Goddess' sisters, a big lioness named Hera, began to slither closer, worming toward her through the low grass. So did Devi, another litter mate, advancing from the other side, hugging the ground. Ganymede and Eros, the males, were up on their haunches raising an awful racket — but it was the females she had to fear. In confrontations with humans, lionesses were the most likely to charge.

Aganippe took a step backward, then another, hoping to ease out of the confrontation.

No good. Hera matched her pace for pace, giving off low growls, her tail lashing. Lions use their tails to balance a charge. Hera's tail swayed once. Twice. Like a cobra about to strike. When it went stiff and straight, the lioness would be on her.

Aganippe swung her spear about to point it at Hera. Lions will bluff charge to chase off humans or hyenas — but even the cat itself cannot always tell when a bluff becomes real.

Out the corner of her eye, she saw a gold streak shooting toward her. It was Devi. She and Hera had cooperated as coolly as they did on a hunt. Hera holding her attention, until it was too late. Devi making the classic charge, tail high, claws out, teeth bared.

She swung her spear, but Devi was already inside her guard. For a frozen instant the lioness seemed to hang in midair, while the spear turned slowly toward her. Then the beast came crashing past the point, smashing into her.

"It's over," she thought, as the ground hit her from behind, knocking the breath out of her.

Devi was on top of her, trying to get her jaws past the spear which was somehow wedged between them. Another lion had a hold of her booted foot.

Kicking and struggling, she shortened her grip on the spear, trying to twist the point about — but it was too late. Devi was blindingly fast. Sinking her teeth into Aganippe's left shoulder, she shook the Moon Maid like a hound worrying a hare. Aganippe felt a euphoric complacency, like lying drugged in the steam bath. Being eaten alive did not hurt near as much as people supposed. Numb to pain, she had only a nagging feeling that all was not right.

Without warning the fury subsided. Devi ceased clawing and biting, collapsing on top of her in a kind of limp hug. Half-blinded by her own blood, Aganippe could not see what happened, but the rest of Goddess Pride vanished, their snarls dying in the distance. She lay on her back, bleeding comfortably, with only the limp Devi for company. An utterly unexpected end to the attack.

A huge hand reached down, lifting Devi off her. Hercules again stood over her, looking fit and relaxed after his triple bout of lovemaking. "Which one is your lion?"

Aganippe stared up at him, still in her pleasant dream state, wondering why the big oaf was bothering her.

"Which lion were you *supposed* to kill?"

She looked about. Devi, Hera, Eros, and Demeter were dead, shot down with Hercules' hydra-poisoned arrows. What remained of the pride had scattered into the thicket. She hardly knew what to think. Someone she considered at best a murderous buffoon had slaughtered her childhood companions, and saved her life.

"Which one?" he demanded.

Shock wore off. Her wounds turned excruciatingly painful. She managed to point at Goddess, lying atop her crooked leg with the arrow through her eye.

Hercules picked up the spear and stuck it into Goddess' chest. The lioness must have weighed as much as he did, but he hoisted her on the spear, slinging her over his shoulder. Then he turned back for Aganippe, who was almost delirious with pain.

She was amazed to see him lift his tunic hem, and reach for his prick. Hercules proceeded to piss long and hard on her wounded shoulder. Aganippe tried to twist away, but she was too weak. Her face and hair were splashed by the stream.

He shook off the last drops, then leaned down and picked her up. She promptly fainted from the pain.

SHE AWOKES on the grassy steppe. Her shoulder, bound with strips of fabric, felt like it was on fire. Her horses were hobbled nearby, cropping the grass. Her hounds were frisking about. Hercules had his own mares hitched to the chariot. A snow white mule and a small herd of red cattle rounded out the menagerie.

There were men around her as well — not just Hercules but a handsome young man in a travel-stained tunic with a leather bag slung over his back. And an older man in a gold embroidered gown carrying a caduceus, the herald's winged staff with snakes wound about it. The mule seemed to be his.

Seeing she was awake, Hercules ambled over, showing her a rent in his tunic where he had torn it to bandage her shoulder. "Do you suppose you could sew this?"

Lying there, weak as a hare, having been clawed, chewed, and pissed on, Aganippe managed to shake her head no.

Hercules sighed. "Someday I'll learn to weave and sew. I am sure to make an exceptional seamstress. Did I tell you how I dressed my lionskin — even though it could not be cut with iron or bronze?"

Aganippe shook her head again.

"I used the beast's own claws." Hercules beamed. "Very clever, I would say."

He clapped the young man on the shoulder, introducing him as his nephew Iolaus. "He fell behind when the cattle and mares escaped." The athletic young nephew had not been able to keep up with Hercules on foot, though he had only his kit to carry while Hercules had been dragging the chariot loaded with armor and whatnot.

Hercules turned to the old gentleman with the mule. "And this is the Dung Man, Copreus, the King of Mycenae's herald, who followed the cattle trail from Thrace. He has the effrontery to tell me that I have not completed my labors."

The Dung Man gave a dignified nod. He had tiny gold-thread caducei sewn into his gown. "That is correct. His second and fifth labors are discounted. Iolaus here helped him to burn off the heads of the Lernaean Hydra. And he used the rivers Alpheus and Peneius to clean out the Augean Stables."

Copreus waved his staff to indicate Geryon's Cattle. "Did you perhaps help him to either find or herd these beasts?"

Hercules roared in indignation. Ready to kill at the suggestion. "She's been in the way since the moment we met. Teasing and distracting me. Getting lost in the night, then mauled by lions."

The herald insisted on hearing it from her.

Aganippe shook her head, saying she had done nothing. Whatever help she rendered was more than paid for, and she did not mean to be brained for nullifying another labor.

Seeing the Dung Man's disappointment, Hercules turned jovial again, lifting her up into his chariot, saying, "I'll take you to your shrine. It is hardly out of my way, and I would hate to leave you bleeding on the steppe." He took up the reins, happily making light of her troubles, "Truth to tell, my lot is much worse than yours. I must go back to the western end of the world and fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. What is a measly lion bite compared to that?"

Aganippe did not answer. Goddess's body lay beside her, staring blankly with her one good eye. Flies crawled in and out of the spear holes. Hercules lashed his horses and they bounced off over the steppe. She fainted again from the agony.

Two weeks later her shoulder was still hurting, but on the mend. Aganippe was young, and never slow to heal — though Horsetamer assured

her she would have died from septic fever if Hercules had not immediately washed her wounds. The rotting flesh beneath a lion's claws could be as fatal as the claws themselves, but a demigod's urine is pristine clean.

As soon as she could ride, she called on the Cimmerian Hetman, bringing him back his spear, along with Goddess' tanned and salted skin, slung over a led horse, ready to go in his son's grave. She showed him the crooked paw, and his granddaughter's remains.

The long-faced Hetman sat her down in his yurt and fed her *kefir*, saying, "A man must not sleep under the same sky with his kin's killer. You have spared me that shame — whatever I have is yours."

"Anything?" Aganippe asked.

"If it is mine to grant." The old Cimmerian swore by the God of War, literally putting his life in her hands, promising to die in battle if he was foresworn.

"Then I want your daughter-in-law."

The Hetman was taken aback.

"And her child as well," Aganippe added.

"But she must warm my son's bed in Hades." The Hetman seemed shocked by the impropriety.

"Does she go consenting?"


"No," the Hetman admitted. "She is a child, and does not understand why she must die."

"Then it will not be much of a marriage — even for Hades. Give her to me instead."

Remembering his oath, the Hetman shrugged. "Do you want your new thrall blinded?"

"No, I will take her as she is."

When her father-in-law told her what her fate would be, the girl went white as chalk, fearing that being given to the mankillers from the Lion Shrine might be worse than simple strangulation. But Aganippe promised she would not be skinned and eaten. "Nor sacrificed either — not to the lions at least. My mother wants granddaughters to raise. You and your little girl must do, until I am ready to have daughters of my own."

She helped the girl aboard the led horse, and handed up the baby. Then she swung one-handed onto her own mount. Turning her back on the wagon lagger, The-Mare-that-Kills-with-Mercy set off over the Laughing Steppe, with her new-found niece and foster sister in tow. 



FILMS

KATHI MAIO

HOORAY FOR SILIWOOD

EVER SINCE that intriguing failure known as *Tron* (1982), most of us have been waiting for computers to make a significant impact on feature filmmaking. Ten years later, we were still waiting. Oh, they've been using computers in special effects work, and in adding computer animation touches to Hollywood movies for years. But the number of computer-generated FX has only increased as the associated costs have decreased. And that's a recent development.

The eye-popping Industrial Light & Magic bits that added so much to 1994's *The Mask* would have been cost-prohibitive just a couple of years earlier in a film with a mere \$20 million — exceedingly modest these days — budget. But cost is only one reason the major studios have been reluctant to fully utilize available technologies. There's also that "vision thing." (The executives in Hollywood have

very, very little of that commodity.)

Why try to explore new avenues when you can make another movie with things exploding around Sylvester Stallone? The good news is that Americans are starting to get wise to such moronic messes. And I'm proud of each and every one of you who helped make *Judge Dredd* the bomb it deserved to be. But, bad news, the international market hasn't gotten the word. He's still a hit overseas. And that's why we keep seeing the same story, told in the same way, over and over again.

With technology, at least you could take the same old story and vary it a bit. As CD-ROM videogaming has proven. Game packages are moving closer and closer to interactive "movies." (And they provide a nice new niche within which actors like Mark Hamill and Tia Carrere can find work....) But they are not, for the most part, being produced by the major studios — except when bad games like *Congo* are manufactured as a means of

propping up even worse feature films.

There was much ballyhooing a few years back, about the rise of Siliwood (Hollywood's creative foray into Silicon Valley). Then nothing much happened. And, frustrated anticipation aside, there are reasons to be grateful that the movie industry is dragging their collective feet toward a brave new world. The industry just might not be brave enough — or smart enough — to pull it off yet.

Remember that Hollywood's first major experiment was an unmitigated disaster. Bob Gale (of *Back to the Future* fame) teamed up with Interfilm and Sony New Technologies to create "Hollywood's first interactive movie," *Mr. Payback*. Released theatrically in early 1995, this tale of a social avenging cyborg was a dumb concept with bad acting and poor production values. In short, an embarrassment for all involved. So, who cared that you could push a button and help decide which stupid thing would happen next when, no matter what button you pushed, the resulting movie was asinine and truly unpleasant?

Mr. Payback helped convince me that we shouldn't be disappointed by Hollywood's reluctance to embrace technological advances. The film industry has such a hard

time fashioning a well-written, cohesive, character-driven plot these days, it would be foolish to encourage today's filmmakers to become even *more* obsessed with toys and tools, rather than simple storytelling. Still, the potential new technologies have to enrich film narrative is so great, you can't help but wonder why the suits in Burbank can't get with the program(mers).

Well, better later than never, things are finally starting to change. And, although I hate to admit this, Steven Spielberg's deeply flawed crowd-pleaser, *Jurassic Park*, was a significant motivator for the rest of Hollywood. Spielberg was able to integrate computer animatronics and computer animation so seamlessly into his live-action blockbuster that everyone else listened to the ka-ching at the global box-office and decided to embrace the future more enthusiastically.

Major studios are still being very conservative about using computer technology to create completely new types of entertainment products. But they are, at least, beginning to take high-tech techniques beyond a quickie, three-second morph here and there. Filmmakers have begun to use computers to create — or significantly enhance — the good, old-fashioned

feature film. Which suits me just fine. As long as they remember that computer graphics should serve the story, and not vice versa.

Unfortunately, in films that integrate human actors with computer animation, the movie too often becomes an FX showcase and little more. For example, the May 1995 release, *Casper*, was a pleasant kiddie flick wherein half of the live-action shots, constituting a whopping 40 minutes of the total screen time, were embellished with ghostly animation by the folks at ILM. The problem wasn't those frisky translucent cartoons, it was (as always) the writing. The spiffy animation seemed to be the engine driving the film.

Likewise, this past holiday season brought the release of *Jumanji*, a screen adaptation of Chris Van Allsburg's wonderful picture book. Again there were some incredible FX split between (or, in some shots, combining) ILM animation and visual effects and Amalgamated Dynamics animatronics. Digital wizards had a major impact upon this film. Too major. Director Joe Johnston (*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*) was so happy to be able to thrill and terrify his audience with elephant stampedes, attacking bats, giant spiders, and hardwood floors that turn into quicksand, that thrilling and terrifying viewers seemed to be

all he was interested in doing. Therefore, character and story development seemed to fall by the wayside.

Oh, *Jumanji* was a fun evening. But it had more in common with a good ride at the Universal theme park than with a really fine motion picture. It was an episodic series of jolts and shivers that left its fine human cast (including Robin Williams, Bonnie Hunt, and Kirsten Dunst) with nothing to do but, like the equally fine cast of *Jurassic Park*, go for the shocked and/or petrified reaction shot in scene after scene.

Hollywood is still having a tough time bringing computer action and live actors into a cohesive whole. So maybe the solution, for now, is to scrap the humanoids altogether! I say this because I recently had the pleasure of seeing *Toy Story*. And I was overjoyed to finally get a glimpse of a future that works!

The feature-length cartoon is, obviously, a perfect place for Hollywood to greet the new dawn of computer graphic imaging (CGI). And since Disney is the acknowledged animation leader, it's appropriate that it was Uncle Walty's successors who offered the first full-length computer-generated cartoon to the eager movie-going public this past holiday season.

Of course, Disney didn't actually *make Toy Story*. That delight-

ful feature was produced in much-maligned Siliwood country, by Pixar Studios, a ground-breaking digital film company that used to be the computer research division of Lucasfilm's ILM. Purchased in 1986 by Steven Jobs after he fell from the Apple tree, the company has been making computer animation shorts (like Listerine commercials) and developing technical software packages (like the widely used RenderMan, used to put the textured skin on *Jurassic Park's* dinos) for the past decade. And all along they dreamed of making a start-to-finish CGI major motion picture.

A Disney-escapee animator who had worked on *Tron* very early in his career, John Lasseter, was particularly driven to make digital features. Lasseter had designed and animated the stained glass knight of *The Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), and won an Oscar for his Pixar computer-animated short, *Tin Toy*, in 1989. In 1991, Lasseter pitched his idea for a computer-animated feature to Disney, and eventually a three-picture deal was struck between cutting-edge Pixar and industry behemoth Disney.

And if *Toy Story*, all 600 billion bytes of it, is any indication, Disney has never made a better deal. What we have is an animated feature, as bright and shiny and new as a freshly

unwrapped Christmas toy — and just as much fun. Because — and here's the real surprise — despite the fact that *Toy Story* was created entirely on location in cyberspace, it has a very human heart. "We're storytellers who happen to use computers," Disney's press kit quotes director John Lasseter as saying. "Story and characters come first and that is what drives everything we do." (For once, the press kit doesn't lie.)

No, we ain't talkin' Shakespeare, here. *Toy Story* isn't even close to profound. And the characters don't exactly achieve an Anthony Hopkins level of complexity. But who wants them to? The film is a spiffy cartoon and a thoroughly entertaining comedy-adventure utilizing the ever-popular "buddy" formula. And, as such, it works like a charm.

Buddy #1 is an old-fashioned pull-string talking cowboy doll called Woody (voiced by movieland's favorite swell-joe, Tom Hanks). Woody is the favorite toy of his owner, a lad named Andy. And as most beloved plaything, Woody is Big Man amongst the toy community of Andy's room. He's an affable fellow. He can afford to be. He's on top of the world (as constituted by the top of Andy's bed). All the other toys, including the irascible Mr. Potato Head (Don Rickles),

the timid tyrannosaur, Rex (Wallace Shawn), and the dopey, devoted Slinky Dog (Jim Varney) look to Woody for leadership. And the pink-pinafoired Bo Peep Lamp (Annie Potts) bats her big eyes only for her cowpoke hero.

Life is good. But precarious. A happy, secure toy can tumble headlong into misery if he is broken, lost, or — the most terrifying and probable of prospects — if he is discarded to the bottom of the toy chest in favor of a new plaything.

This is a brilliant bit of angst for *Toy Story* to play with, I must say. Woody's situation is one every human can relate to. Every child who has ever faced the abandonment fears associated with the arrival of a new sibling knows this raging despair. Every lover who's ever been dumped, or feared they might be, knows it, too. Not to mention every worker (and that's way too many of us!) who's waited, with utter dread, for the axe of "downsizing" to fall upon their exposed neck. Woody's vulnerability is universal. Which, even more than its impressive 3-D animation technique, is what makes this little fable so lifelike.

So it is in an agony of suspense that Woody and his compatriots await the results of young Andy's birthday party. And the news is

good for birthday boy, but bad for the forgotten community up in his bedroom. Andy has just received a super whizbang new toy, a shiny spaceman doll called Buzz Lightyear (voiced with self-satisfied machismo, and more than a dab of Dudley Do-Right denseness, by *Home Improvement's* Tim Allen). Gloriously plastic, battery-operated, and heavily laden with dodads and gadgets, Buzz easily becomes Andy's favorite toy. And, just as easily, he becomes the new poobah of playland.

Woody is crushed. And is less than gracious about his ouster. (The Gary Cooper side of his cowboy personality seems to be losing out to his Jack Palance demons.) Woody behaves badly, ends up expelled from the relative safety of Andy's room, in an outside world filled with dangers — not the least of which is the next-door neighbor boy, a toy torturer named Sid. Worse, he is joined in his exile by his hated rival, Buzz.

Who has his own problems. It seems that old Buzz suffers from delusions of deep space. He truly believes that he is a hero pledged to keep the intergalactic peace, and do battle with the Evil Emperor Zurg. He has no idea that he is nothing more than an object of childhood pleasure manufactured in Taiwan.

And when a television commercial ("Not a Flying Toy") forces the terrible realization upon him, Buzz must rely on the repentant Woody to give him a new reason to embrace *This Toy's Life*, even in the clutches of death — that is to say, the fiendish grasp of the dreaded Sid.

The buddy adventure aspect of *Toy Story* is pretty standard stuff — although it seems brand-new, told in this handsome computer animation. It's the smaller scenes that really make this movie great, though. Like the funny, and not a little sad, scene that introduces us to dozens of alien squeeze toys tossed and jammed into a grabber arcade game. They view the box's mechanical claw as their god who, from time to time, transports a "chosen" one to another — but not, as the audience realizes, better — world. Or the "Bucket of Soldiers" — all khaki green, with their mold seams and feet platforms just like we remember them — who go on a brave recon mission to spy on Andy's birthday gifts.

Adults and older kids will also enjoy spotting all the inside jokes and wordplays in the film (e.g., the house "For Sale" sign that sports the company logo, Virtual Realty).

But, bar none, the film's most brilliant creations are the evil Sid's mutant toys, concocted out of sal-

vaged parts from savaged playthings — duck heads, Hulk torsos, Barbie legs, and the like. When our two heroes become stranded in Sid's world, they are, at first, terrified of these scrap monsters. But in the film's triumphant climax, they band together with these "others" to defeat their common enemy. It's a wonderful, empowering moment. And it's the mutant toys, much more than Woody or Buzz, who haunt the imagination long after the film is over.

It is indicative of the short-sightedness and conservatism of the Disney mega-corp. that when they cranked up their retail merchandising machine for *Toy Story* they put all their energies into Woodys and Buzzes. They didn't even *think* of packaging up any of the mutants for the home market. Fools! They could have sold a million "Babyfaces," a tragi-comic figure consisting of a sweet-faced babydoll head, with a damaged eye, and all its hair ripped out to the roots, jammed onto a spider body made out of Erector Set parts.

But I'm, again, more grateful than resentful about Hollywood's lack of vision. Disney has a tendency to package and re-package their products until you want to scream. Even if the bald-faced lies of *Pocahontas* didn't deeply offend

you months ago, you're probably sick and tired of seeing Disney's buckskin Barbie — on T-shirts, lunch boxes, bed linens, and every other damn thing — by now. For once, an animated character may be allowed to live in a child's imagination rather than in shelves of products in the malls of America.

I'm also grateful to Pixar for resisting the Disney obsession that every feature cartoon be a musical. As bizarre as it might sound when referring to a cartoon produced through over 800,000 machine hours on a "farm" of Sun SPARCstations, *Toy Story* was far too naturalistic for that I-feel-a-song-coming-on nonsense. Randy Newman's handful of fine songs mostly grace the title and credit sequences, and are much less intrusive than Disney's standard, ersatz Broadway methodology.

As someone who finds most Disney feature cartoons to be lush, handsome, and politically reactionary, I found that *Toy Story* raised far fewer of my hackles. (I attribute this to the Bay Area nerd thing the folks at Pixar have going on.) But I won't say that *Toy Story* didn't raise any concerns for me. I was, I must admit, dismayed by the film's sexism. This is definitely a boy's world, and even the toys that appear gender-neutral are made male with

male voices. (Except for that regrettable Bo Peep, all in pink, who seems to have vapors of admiration over the boy toys. She doesn't want adventure, all she wants is a chance for a little kissy-face.) Jeez, who says a Slinky Dog is masculine? And heck, couldn't we at least have Rex voiced by a female? (After all, in the original *Jurassic Park*, all the dinos started out female, as I recall.)

To be fair, though, I don't think this was all Pixar's fault. I remember seeing an interview with one of the film's writers, Joss Whedon (Hollywood's current script-doctor of choice, and hot young screenwriter of the moment). He said that he had wanted to have Barbie drive up in her pink convertible, like *T2*'s Sarah Connor, and save Woody and Buzz. Unfortunately, unlike the makers of Mr. Potato Head, Slinky, and Etch-a-Sketch, Mattel didn't want the princess image of their plastic fetish tarnished by a tawdry cartoon. (More corporate shortsightedness!)

On a more esthetic level, I could also quibble about the way human beings are rendered by the animators. While the toys — plastic, cloth, and metal — all look dandy, the few people we see in the cartoon look pallid, rubbery, and somehow flat. Which is, no doubt, one of the reasons the film spends so little time

with its human characters.

Which is okay this time out. But this is clearly an area where progress still needs to be made in CGI. After all, human beauty is much more irregular and magically unique than that of a mass-produceable hunk of good-looking plastic (Sorry, Buzz!). And that makes it even harder to "render" on even the fastest computer workstation.

They'll get there someday. And, since I fear that the development of the believable "virtual actor" will

probably only give Hollywood an excuse to blow people literally to bits without having to fake the action with an endangered stunt person, I am more than willing to wait for this particular development. Yet, despite all the inherent dangers (for cruel idiocy) that may stem from Hollywood's reluctant embrace of new technology, the splendiferous triumph that is *Toy Story* leaves me oddly optimistic.

I'm almost elated enough to say.... By gum, I think I will say it: Hooray for Siliwood! 🍀

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Kilroy Was Here

By Jack Cady

He dreamed his feet were so cold that he ran to the battalion aid station, and there were his mother and sister fixing him some hot food over a wood fire, and poking up the fire so he could warm his feet. But before he could eat the food or warm his feet he woke up — and his feet were still cold.

Ernie Pyle — *Brave Men*

I

THE V.A. HOSPITAL SITS solemn and grand above this too busy northwest city where traffic rumbles and rain mostly pours. Dark-

ness lies between this place and the city, a darkness we've but noticed lately. I totter at a red hot half-a-mile an hour along lighted halls and Burnside generally outruns me. Burnside drives a wheelchair and his motto is, "Leave no nurse's butt unpatted," because, as he says, "Waste is a sin and I'm practicin' to be a preacher."

And this V.A. hospital, itself, is no bad place for a Burnside type of ministry. The hospital stands like a temple, and through its halls and

secret passages and operating rooms eternally pour shapes of human hope and pain; shapes of mystery, dread, high times and low. People stride or tippy-toe or cakewalk these halls depending on who's got what share of joy or trouble, and where that trouble lives. Talking about the geriatric ward, Burnside says to me, "It ain't altogether a noble occupation, Ross, but it's three hots and a flop. It is, by God, a livin'."

"It's a dying," I tell him. "It's the jump-off place where the world takes its last shot, and Sarge, the world is gonna win." When you talk to Burnside you have to mix good sense with a touch of facts or he won't understand. Burnside has flung b.s. for seventy-six of his seventy-eight years, having been somewhat slow as a baby.

He rolls that wheelchair like a Hell's Angel of the geriatric ward; a wheelchair with racing stripes, a foxtail, an ooga-ooga horn, and the remnants of a Japanese battle flag fluttering from a stick of the kind you see on bicycles. Burnside has arms and shoulders like a dwarfed goliath, and legs so thin his small feet look like powderpuffs attached to toothpicks. "It's a real adventure being in this kind of shape," he tells me. "You learn to crap in a lotta new ways." Burnside has about three red hairs remaining along each temple, his dome is bald, his mustache gray, and hair sprouting from his ears approaches maroon.

The kind thing would be to let him pass away in silence, and the smart thing would be to pass away myself; but days stretch long when the brain is good and the body is shot — and for too long, maybe, we've been silent. My hands no longer hold a pen, but thanks to the mysterious East I have a tape recorder that works. My hips almost don't work. I've got hips like cracked glass.

My tape recorder purrs like a Japanese cat as I tell about what happens, or has happened, and as I concentrate on Burnside. Burnside was okay until, some years ago, he bounced a Honda Goldwing off a phone pole and into a lady's petunia patch. She stood wailing over bruised petunias. He claims to have hammed it up over a busted motorcycle and a busted pelvis, taking advantage of the situation in an attempt to lure her into the sack.

Other people around here are lucky, maybe. They fester in a vegetable state. They've disconnected from the world, have dreamed their ways into the past, and become ghosts who sit before the dayroom TV, listening to chatter, patter, gossip, and lisping cartoons. The TV spooks are more ghostly than the real ghosts who plague this hospital. This place is a ghost factory.

It was the real ghosts who started things. We lifers were peaceful enough telling lies about our different wars, and about our lives in and out of the military. We were happy checking obituaries each day, and chorling over the passing of generals and presidents. "The main difference between dead and alive," says Burnside, "is that 'dead' means off the payroll."

Then the ghosts got into it. They generally hang around the cemetery out back with its brightly glowing slabs, or else jungle up in broom closets or under beds. They wisp their ways through these halls, rolling along silent as the soft paws of dust kittens. The orderlies don't see them. The nurses don't see them. We can hardly see them.

"It's a perfect set-up," Burnside says. "Plenty of company, cafeteria, television, bed, and a cemetery right at hand." Then he tells a Burnside-type of story. Once, in the days after he retired from the Infantry, he worked as a groundskeeper in a corpse-farm called *Rest Eternal*. "They had amazin' discounts for employees," he tells anyone who will listen. "I was losin' money every day I stayed alive."

But stories about Burnside's past didn't amount to a pastel damn once the present took over. The ghosts in this geriatric ward began manifesting. We didn't know what was happening at first. We did know our ranks were thinning...around here the ranks are always thinning. In a little over a month two beds opened up as Sgts. Smith and Sanders passed to the great beyond. Their empty chairs in the dayroom quickly filled with a couple of retired Marines still dumb enough to believe they were assigned to temporary duty. Plus, another bed was knocking on empty. The door to Corporal Harvey's room stayed closed. Nurses came and went, came and went. Doctors avoided the place. All signs read "Farewell, Dan Harvey."

Darkness started to roll along the hallways, and darkness clustered in the geriatric ward. The dayroom clouded, became blue like a 1940's bar filled with jazz and tobacco smoke. A clarinet wailed as the TV ceased its quack and faded without a flicker. Darkness fell in individual rooms and squelched the common sounds of people puking, or gasping and sucking for breath, or whimpering as pain pills wore off.

Not a mother's son or daughter in that dayroom missed a thing, although nurses kept scampering back and forth, back and forth, unseeing.

Ghosts appeared tricked out in their best things, and so solid you could see them. The men wore '40's uniforms, and the women looked like

Greta Garbo, except more fun; American, English, other kinds, mostly oriental. Some of the gals wore uniforms, most wore dresses. The clarinet wailed like the love-ridden and lonesome voice of a transport leaving dock, the voice behind final waves, final goodbyes. The clarinet talked about Lili Marlene, and in the background a trombone sobbed. The ghosts seemed to be trying to tell us something. A sailor ghost flagged semaphore; colored flags whipping around the alphabet, but the only man on the ward who knew how to read it was a blind quartermaster, so that was a loss.

The halls became bluer, smokier, like lukewarm passions in the dusk of an old man's mind. Chill air moved through the halls, and the door to Corporal Harvey's room opened. A nurse stepped through the doorway, her shoulders slumped, her hair astray, and she carried that beaten look the nurses get when they have lost.

"Janet," Burnside said in an abstract and irrelevant way that for the moment held no b.s. "Susan. Yukiko san. The girls we left behind." He watched another dejected nurse leave Corporal Harvey's room. "That poor sumbitch is so dead," he muttered, "that he really ought to go on sick call."

We sat blinking. No one here ever thought of ghosts as more than shadows or memories, fragments of aged imaginations. The past adds up as men age, and remembered voices come from everywhere. Now it seemed there was more to it. I thought of reasons for being in a haunted place. I thought of history, of how things begin.

We credit tuberculosis with the building of this hospital. In the early parts of the century the "tee bees" took lives in breathless manners as lungs turned to shreds of dangling tissue, as lesions and excrescence sought out final gasps behind lips stained with choked-up blood. Tuberculosis is not the most vivid of diseases. That score goes to cholera; but unlike cholera, t.b. spelled equal opportunity. It killed schoolteachers and bankers and captains of industry.

Our government, being enlightened, warehoused victims instead of shooting. It built hospitals in remote places. This hospital towers on a long hill overlooking a city that was once a place of neighborhoods if not a city of light. The hospital is thus downwind from prevailing weather patterns. The hospital is huge, serving as a landmark for airplanes, and even a landmark for ships cruising Puget Sound. Its outside displays yellow brick, and its inside glows mental-ward green.

By 1940 the docs found ways to beat tuberculosis. Some hospitals closed for lack of customers. Then, as Burnside points out, the happiest circumstance occurred. World War II arrived and spelled a blessing for the medics. "Gave them something to do," Burnside says. "Kept 'em off the streets and out of jail. I never heard of a single doc who got vagged."

A great mixing of ghosts began as the hospital resurrected, first under the military, then under the V.A. Spirits whirled, like in a Waring blender. On the west coast most casualties came from the South Pacific, although a lot of freeze and burn cases came from that snafu in the Aleutians. Men died in colorful ways, or were launched to new adventures from the ORs; adventures in learning to walk without legs, work without hands, see without eyes — adventures in sipping beer through a straw when too sad and drunk to pick a glass up with a G.I. prosthesis. Brain cages cooked like french fries as electricity zapped, shock therapy being a hobby with the best medical minds of the day. A grateful nation, loving its loyal sons, did its damndest to sweep the warped remnants of men under the shaggy shagrug of history.

Fortunately for the hospital, as Burnside points out, the country discovered a conscience. "War saves people from themselves," Burnside says, "and we found how to save the slanteyes. We can shoot in any Asian language."

The hospital did not finish sweeping up WWII before Korea vets began to hurt, and Korea did not get swept up even after Viet Nam. Around here, docs still sweep, and nurses slump with fatigue and failure when another soul goes west.

What with soldiers and sailors and jarhead marines, it is no surprise this hospital seems loaded with ghosts. I say "loaded" and not "haunted" because until Corporal Harvey checked out, the ghosts saw us the same way we saw them, which is to say, insubstantial. Ghosts didn't give a hang for us, nor did they give a fat rat's behind. And we didn't think they were any too loveable.

I sat, still blinking, and thinking of history and ghosts and blue light and 1940's bars; of transports and tears. Our ghosts had just held a real shindig, then disappeared. The ghost waving semaphore was last to leave.

"Sarge," I said to Burnside, "what in the world was all of that about?" I eased into a chair in the dayroom, sitting among TV stiffes, and looked around. Twenty old soldiers parked there, including a couple of

Wacs...during WWII one of those kids helped run an ops center in jolly old Liverpool, the other did time in a supply room in Norfolk. There are not many women in V.A. geriatric wards. We only have these two.

Now the Wacs nudged the guys beside them, and the gals made dry-throat giggles of the kind that say, "catch me if you can." Tallulah Bankhead had nothing on these kids, and who would've ever suspected?

"Ross, old buddy, that's amazin'." Burnside watched the women, watched the surprised but suddenly interested men. "If that's the best they can do, okay. I've got my sights a few clicks higher."

"No b.s.," I told him. "What was all of that about?" I looked around the dayroom. No clarinet, no blue light, nobody waving semaphore or goodbye. The door to Corporal Harvey's room remained closed. Come lights-out orderlies would steal in with a gurney, play body-snatcher, and by dawn's early light Corporal Harvey would become a fading memory. This hospital never snatches corpses in broad daylight. It depresses the troops.

"I can't figure it. If the corporal's on the far side, why is the far side waving goodbye? Makes me right uneasy." Burnside popped a wheelie. The wheelchair rared like a pony with ambition, then hit the floor as Burnside spun in a circle. He would catch fire-breathing hell if any nurse saw that wheelie. Staff does not like wheelies. Wheelies mark the deck, cause scuff marks the buffers almost can't erase, and wheelies are traces of rebellion by patients.

Plus everyone would know it was Burnside's wheelie. He's the only one of the wheelchair bunch strong enough to pop a good one. He spun the chair in three intersecting circles, like an ad for Ballantines. "A snort before lunch, and a snooze after." He pointed the chair toward his room.

"It's the solitary drinkers who end up doing time," I told him. "You shouldn't drink alone." I followed Burnside, and I followed slow. On good days I can make it through these hallways leaning on a cane. Most days I chase a walker. This place is — this place. If we did not have bullshit, we'd be dead. Let me explain.

Pain around here is real. Around here bodies do not heal, and exercise does not work out stiffness. Doctors can mask some serious pain with pills, and people can hide from pain a little bit by using sedatives and drugged sleep. Pain here is eternal, like sunrise and sunset. It's a part of conditions, part of a deal which says: if you live long enough, you have to hurt.

In this place puke is nasty, sour, bile-filled, vomit that more often than not travels along raw throats from guts that can no longer work a full shift. Puke comes laden with blood. In this place hip bones are so fragile one dares not stumble, and people who fall out of bed do not survive. When one is very, very old skin becomes thin as tissue paper, and cartilage around the nose disappears, causing it to retract. The face looks like a skull with skin.

This is human stuff; the human thing we do not like to think about, not even when it's happening. Sooner or later, though, it comes to a lot of us. The only people who are young forever are the ones who early-on have the bad luck to get in the way of bullets or trucks or killing disease. The message in this place says: you weren't smart enough to die young, so get it figured out.

Some people don't figure. They become TV stiffs, and TV sucks them into its own darkness. Some people do figure, but they mask their figuring with bullshit. Bullshit is the first line of defense against pain, or, as Burnside says of Corporal Harvey — "All that poor bastard had was cancer. I've got cancer *and* a Combat Infantryman's Badge."

"You've only got the prostate kind," I tell him, "and Harvey had it in the gizzard. Prostate comes from frigging around with preacher's wives. Anybody can get it."

The first line of defense against pain...the other secret about pain is that it's easier to handle if you don't feel sorry for yourself. Burnside and I, and most of these geriatrics, learned about not feeling sorry for yourself during grade school. Of course, all of that happened some years ago. The reasons for our learning are now in history books. As Casey Stengle used to say, "You could look it up."

So I followed Burnside as he headed for our room. We bunk two to a room in this place, until it comes time to die. Then they move us into solitary. As I followed I looked forward to a jolt of bourbon, either Burnside's bourbon or mine. Burnside could find whiskey in the middle of the Sahara, and I could find the beer chaser.

Our stash hides in what used to be a dumbwaiter. This hospital has been redesigned so many times even architects lose track of how everything fits. At one time or other dumbwaiters were plastered over. We opened this one, flushed plaster piece-at-a-time down the latrine, and I hung battalion colors of the 120th Engineers over the hole. The 120th is not my outfit anyway, and screw the 120th.

"That was one swell party. Harvey must of meant something to somebody." Burnside uncorked the Jim Beam. We were both having a tough time because of Harvey. Dan Harvey had been a good friend.

"I always thought those ghosties were just part of your imagination," Burnside said. "Ross, you're getting elderly."

He took a belt, wiped his mouth, then took a little sip and passed the bottle. I took it from him just in time to keep it from getting dropped. Burnside looked up, fumbled, saw something standing behind my shoulder. His face went white as a corpse. Then his mouth twitched, and his hands dropped to the wheels of the chair like he was ready to lead a charge. "What are you doing here?" he whispered, and for the second time in a single day his voice held no b.s. He looked at me. "You'll want to take a lick outta that bottle before you turn around."

A Japanese soldier stood behind me as I turned. He seemed polite. He looked almost solid, nearly real. This kid couldn't have been more than twenty-five, though with Japs it's hard to tell. He wore one of those dink uniforms with a sash. He bowed. I bowed right back at him, or at least as well as a stiff back and hips can. Old shapes took me over. The courtesy seemed downright civilized after bunking beside Burnside. The bow seemed to please the kid. He smiled, then vanished. Puff. Little blue mist. Nothing.

I turned to Burnside, and Burnside was so bleached I thought he died. His bald head shone, and fluorescent light lay across it like polish. Those heavy shoulders slumped, and his mouth formed what I feared was a permanent "oh." Then his hands stirred. "This is serious," he said. "Pour another shot, but don't pass the bottle. I'll drop it surely."

I sat on the bed, and my hand, which naturally trembles, really trembled. The whiskey, which is one of the last good things in life, roiled my gut, but was worth the roil. "Tell me," I said to Burnside.

"It happened on the Canal," he told me. "At the time he was a better man than me. We accidentally bumped into each other while mutually retreating. I shot him in the gut and my M1 popped its clip. Empty. He leaned on a tree, slid down to sit on his butt, and pointed a pistol at me. He studied the situation, and saw how we'd all been reamed. I could see it in his eyes. He just plain said, 'Aw, screw it,' which is 'shiranuga hotoke' in Japanese. Then he flipped the pistol away, tipped on his side, and declared peace on all the world."

Rubber soles padded in the hall and I hid the bottle beneath a pillow. Burnside's ears are not as sharp as mine. He took my signal, though, and had his face more or less composed by the time nurse Johnson entered the room. "There's a little more to it," he whispered.

"This had better not be happy hour," Johnson said as she entered. Nurse Johnson is on day shift, and that improves our days. "You deadbeats don't fool anybody."

Johnson gets more dejected than most of the other nurses when she loses a patient, and she'd just lost Harvey. Sometimes she hangs around us, I swear, just because we still show a little life. It perks her up. We do our best to behave indecent.

IN THIS GERIATRIC WARD doctors outrank Jesus, who, as the Navy boys will tell you, was only a carpenter's mate. Doctors, though, stand with God at their right hands. Nurses range in rank from cherub right on up to holy saint.

And how, one may well ask, did all this come about? And where, one may well ask, does Nurse Johnson fit among that celestial chorus? And for how long, one may further ask, has Burnside been trying to put the make on her?

Take it by-the-numbers, because Burnside isn't going to score anyway, so there's no big hurry:

Some people here are dark towers of pain, and some are small, dense, compressed mounds of pain. Burnside, for all his fanny rides a wheelchair, qualifies as a dark tower with flares burning at the top. You don't become a compressed mound, around here, until you lose sight of everything happening beyond your own body. When the body is all that's left for the brain to think about, doctors become the center of the universe. If Burnside did not cuss presidents, and chase women, and originate reams of originals and copies in the way of bullshit, he'd become a mound. I would myself, except, of course, nothing about me hurts except my walker which has four legs and thus more opportunity.

And who am I to judge? At this age everybody has his own pain and his own ghosts, or his own memories, and perhaps ghosts and memories are all the same. People wrap themselves in the past, spinning cocoons around pain. Memories insulate against the ice of death creeping upward from their feet, against eternal cold entering their veins. Men dream of

childhood, of crystalline winters warm by woodstoves...although ice-flowers form on window panes of the soul; and they dream of a cherry tree in blossom, and perhaps the welcoming smile of a girl they met but once, yet dreamed of always.

So who am I to judge? I'm just another dogface who rode the G.I. Bill. A dogface who became a high school history teacher who became retired, who became adjudged incapable of living alone; and maybe the judges were right. On the other hand I've seen Europe and Asia, and know how to run B.A.R.s, 30 m.m. m.g.s, mortars, and tests in American history given to teenagers equally endowed with hope and beauty and zits.

And Nurse Johnson, who is she?

She's one of those dreamers for whom the world has no time. Let's call her early thirties, which is kindly, and beautiful, which is true. She tucks her long hair up under her silly little cap, and walks long-legged through these halls in a way that makes you thankful for the memories of women. Her nose is a little too sharp for the cover of fashion magazines, and her look is too kindly to ever get her hired for television. Her eyes are hazel, her mouth generous, her body enticingly slight. She moves like a girl when she's happy, and the soul of tiredness when she's not. Nurse Johnson cares too much about her job, and is going to burn out. I hope she holds on until Burnside passes. Burnside claims to have spent his whole life in debauchery, and Nurse Johnson, who is his greatest challenge, should also be his last sight when leaving this vale.

And thus, in the ranks of heaven, is Nurse Johnson a one-ring Warrant officer, which is just enough gold braid to sing alto in the chorus of the Lord.

"It's these fast machines," Burnside said to me and patted his wheelchair. "They always get the girls." To Nurse Johnson he said, "Sergeant Ross was just leaving."

Johnson stood beside the bed where I sat, smiled a sad little smile, and pretended to ignore Burnside. "The dayroom's in an uproar. You guys did something that upset everybody. What?" Her hair is kind of dishwater blond, but gleamy. It fluffs and softens the effect of that sharp little nose.

"Nothing much," I lied. "Burnside told a couple sea stories. Corporal Harvey kicked. Burnside sang something about Minnie the Moocher. Burnside's the man you want." No good could come from telling any nurse about an infestation of ghosts.

I hate to see so much sorrow in a face, and Johnson's reflected about

as much sorrow as anyone could bear. She can't get it through her head that being dead is not that big a deal. Toward the end Harvey's pain outpaced the drugs. He was bed-ridden. He wouldn't put up with spending his life in bed, nor would I, nor would Burnside...at least not alone.

"He left messages for you both," she said. "I liked Corporal Harvey, even if he did hang out with you guys." Johnson should work in a maternity ward, not with geriatrics. "Minnie the Moocher," she said to me. "Do you guys ever tell the truth?"

"On Sundays."

"Or when it don't cost a red cent," Burnside said. "Sergeant Ross is cheap, but I know how to show a girl a good time." As he spoke he kept looking around like a man searching the jungle for snipers. His Japanese ghost would probably not show up with a nurse nearby, but with ghosts who can tell?

"Both of you are going to hate this, or at least I think you are." Nurse Johnson's mouth held just the littlest bit of a sad smile. Her eyelids were a little blinky, a little teary. It came to me that maybe we're more to her than pluses or minuses on a nurse's scoresheet. On the other hand, no sense getting too emotional.

"Corporal Harvey understands why the Buddha smiles," she said to me. "He told me to say that to you. He also told me that he has been instructed not to explain it to you." She turned to Burnside, and she sort of bit her lower lip.

I tipped and nearly fell off the edge of the bed. Nurse Johnson was flipping it right back at us. Men dying of cancer do not leave final messages. Men dying of cancer live in great caverns of pain, caverns illumined with the unrighteous fires of infernos real as those of Dante. Men dying of cancer writhe internally, the violence and chaos of tumor overreaching any last intelligence. Pain becomes pure, probably, and maybe such purity has something to do with the Buddha, but sure as hell men don't talk about it.

"And for Sergeant Burnside," Nurse Johnson said, "and I quote verbatim: Harvey said, 'Get off your goldbrickin' butt and find an honest job.'"

"Got the last word, didn't he?" Burnside's voice filled with admiration even as he continued to scout the room. "Harvey always could pile it on." Burnside was not exactly distracted, but his attention went toward shadows in corners, or any other place that might hide visions and worries from the past.

I sort of blinked at Nurse Johnson, and she sort of winked at me. Burnside sat between us, and Burnside was stupidly buying every ounce of it. I figured this day marked a turning point in Nurse Johnson's career. This was bigger than Paul Bunyon. She had just bullshitted the most noted purveyor of b.s. ever to appear in the history of the American West.

For three days the geriatric ward fell back into the drone of routine, except for occasional sorties by TV stiffs. The lads, and two lasses, made tracks to the back windows of this wing beyond which lies Memorial Gardens, the military cemetery, or, as Burnside puts it, The Old Soldier's Home.

Burnside and I went as well, but we did not settle for looking out the windows. We inched through the doorway, onto a concrete terrace, and looked over the terrain. It was not a position I'd wish to defend, and not a position I'd wish to take. From a tactical point of view it's an infantryman's nightmare.

There's a narrow strip of lawn bordering the terrace, then a narrow cemetery with gleaming markers running crosswise the hill, as if some wiseacre had pasted a decorated bandage on nature. At the lower edge of the cemetery there's third growth forest, gently sloping over desolate ground, the last undeveloped area. Beyond the forest a rickety footbridge spans a ravine, and, across the bridge and at the bottom of the hill, there lie the remnants of a Victorian park. The park was once a place where ladies and gentlemen strolled, and where children played. When this hospital went military in the long ago, something happened down there. Maybe it became off-limits. Maybe the darkness we've but lately noticed has dwelt in that park among shadows of neglect. The covered bandstand is broken, the roof cracked, the steps rotted. Ornamental iron fences are rusted, and ornamental trees stand unpruned, while hedges are overgrown. From a distance, though, it still looks like a spot of sanity in all that desolation.

No one goes there anymore, not even to cut firewood. Our V.A. ghosts don't go there. If it is a haunted wood, a haunted park, a haunted spot of history, then it's haunted by something more hideous than ghosts, and more dangerous than guns. This hospital has its safe side, with roads and lawns. It has this dark side, dark nearly to black, empty of life. Not even a bird chirps, and the only way you could defend that position would be

with light artillery. If you attacked it you would get nothing but tree bursts from mortars.

Burnside and I, along with the resurrected TV stiffs, gazed across rows of glowing white cemetery stones beneath the flowing flag of a great nation. We gazed toward the forest, the ravine, then toward a city that once exported food and manufactures to the world, a city that now exports only noise and entertainment, and imports everything else. Not one of the TV stiffs, viewing that lordly flag and chronically troubled city, had enough gumption to rub his crotch.

"There's more to tell about that kid," I later said to Burnside, reminding him about his Japanese ghost.

"He was young, and I made him dead. You'll recall there was a war goin' on. I was only young. I figured to score information about the enemy. I went through his pockets." Burnside motioned upward to the remnants of the Japanese battle flag. "They carried these personal battle flags. He can have it back. I only use it to get the girls. Women can't resist that kind of accomplishment." Burnside's voice seemed a little forced, like he was having a hard time spreading it; and that was another first.

Change filled the air like low-grade electricity. Everyone, except those in the final stages of senility — and maybe even those — could sense that the far side put together its own routine.

Shadows drifted along the walls, although nothing solid enough to cause a shadow appeared. Murmurs hovered behind everyone's ears, little whispers from the past. After the first day, newsreels began running in our minds, newsreels of the passing parade, a parade of history and war. I heard voices of people dead and gone, some of them loved, and some despised. I heard mutters of cannonade rumbling behind broken horizons. I heard terrified squalling of children, heard the voice of the enemy speaking crackling kraut language; and I heard the sobbing of women, because, yes, it is possible to sob in German.

I heard again sounds from the invasion of Europe and sounds from emplacements in Korea. Burnside heard things a little differently. Being ambitious, Burnside tried to square away the whole Pacific theater before doing occupation duty in Japan.

"I always feared you were a little feeble-minded," he told me, "but never thought you'd run around with someone who's hearing things. You're a nut case, Ross."

Meanwhile, routine droned right along. Nurse Johnson remained busy, distracted, continually ignoring the pain of her job as she tried to reduce swelling in lives around her. Nurse Johnson heard no ghosts and saw none, perhaps being too busy. Routine sustained her and steadied us; and this is the way routine runs, even in a geriatric ward invaded from the other world as — we may assume — most of them are.

Day begins at four A.M. when pain pills wear off. Very old people sleep but indifferently. We wake and wrestle whatever greets us, be it suppurating sores, or unknit bones. From four until six most lie in the stupor of half dreams. Voices from the past congregate, argue, complain about our attitudes. Brothers, long dead, appear as in their youth. They bandy jokes, or present intense situations that never really happened, but could have if everyone had been smarter at the time. Fathers cuss and mothers explain. Sometimes a favorite aunt appears...but, sometimes, the hours between four and six breed monsters. Men see faces: of people they have killed, or women they betrayed.

At six A.M. pill time begins. Lights up. The stage opens to the day's comedy — or tragedy if that be the will of the Lord. At six A.M. everyone coughs a lot, and if one is destined to die choking, the odds are best around six. Pills run the range of the pharmacopoeia. Drugs take on personalities. Most are plebian, some even duller, but some are simply splendid. Some drugs cause dreams to run a riff, a coda, a trumpet ride like Ziggy Elman playing "And the Angels Sing."

Burnside, with a big reputation for going off on his own initiative, and being independent as a hog on ice, waits for no nurse or orderly. He has a system of stainless steel pulleys rigged over his bed. It's like living next door to a circus. Still, it's tough to see him swing here and there. The man would have made a fine elf or gremlin or leprechaun, or even a grown-up pixie, and he's reduced to swinging like an ape. He lowers himself into his seat and heads for the latrine, the tattered battle flag like a broken sun above that rolling chair.

Breakfast comes at seven. You can take it in your room or hit the chow line at the cafeteria. Among geriatrics the chow line carries a message: line up here and tell the world you're still kicking.

Our troops break bread in the company of younger patients, guys in their 40s to 60s who have their own specters, but who were not seeing ours. These are leftovers from later wars. Nearly all are cripples, and not

a few are crazy. I wouldn't trust a one with rubber bands and paper clips, let alone a dull knife.

Physical therapy starts at 8:30 and lasts until you drop, which in most cases is 8:45. Burnside doesn't need it. His jaw works just elegant, and his legs are nearly ready to fall off, anyway. He gets plenty of wholesome push and pull from that chair. "I'd get a Harley," he complains, "but they don't build 'em."

Doctors pull rounds from ten to lunch. They detail hip replacements, spinal taps, and 'ectomies to rearrange the innards. The docs make time-tested jokes, and are capable of their own b.s. After all, what are wars created for?

"Other hospitals ain't this nice," Burnside explains to anyone who bitches. "In Japan the nurses are all dykes. In England the docs sound like Mortimer Snerd. In Frogland..." he then rolls his eyes and tries to appear lewd "...which is why DeGaulle had that tremendous big nose. DeGaulle was damn popular."

Before lunch, and especially during uncertain days, we grab the Jim Beam, "have a little sip," as Louis Armstrong used to say, then chase the whiskey with a bowl of soup. "It ain't like South Dakota," Burnside explains. "Back on the farm we never drank after four A.M." Burnside credits South Dakota as the place that made him famous. After putting in his time, and drawing retirement from Uncle Sugar, he went back home. "The only available job in all of South Dakota was with a porta-pot outfit." He worked and really strived. In just three months he got promoted to head poop.

After lunch and a nap, some patients receive visitors, be they relatives or social workers or church ladies or a chaplain. Some visitors bring photos of great-grandchildren, as if anyone here pretended to give a hang for the precious tykes, or photos of great-great grandchildren who will not need this ward until the back half of the next century. Visitors talk valentine talk. I listen and imagine those kiddies as they will become, dressed in spandex uniforms, lasers at the ready, enduring fleabites as they crawl through mud, or lie chilled and sleeping on frozen tundra. I imagine them in trenches along some MLR, huddled behind a supersonic zap gun, and they have their shod feet tucked in sleeping bags to avoid going lame from freezing. Enjoy your childhoods, youngsters, because as long as there are humans there'll always be the Infantry.

Burnside and I ran our visitors away more than a year ago, old age being a private occupation — and at the time we thought our reasons made sense. I honestly told my visitors to shove off, but Burnside waxed eloquent. He pretended to discover religion. His wheelchair became a pulpit. He preached, favoring Moses and Abraham, and Burnside scared himself half to death. He ran his visitors away all right, but among the TV stiffes he actually made a convert, a gunner's mate named Hawkins who was, anyway, on his road to glory. "Packed him off to heaven," Burnside mumbled, "...no good deed goes unpunished...stars in my crown..." The power of the Word scared the living bejesus out of Burnside, and that's the truth of it.

Visitors leave by mid-afternoon, and then arrives The Hour of Charm. Until ghosts got into it, this was the hour of apparitions sliding just on the edge of perception. We could almost see days of our youth, hear the clatter of new model T Fords, or the very first singing commercial from the domed cathedral of a radio aglow with vacuum tubes. We listened as fathers and uncles bulled widely about World War I, while grandfathers flipped b.s. about Gettysburg and Shiloh, or Cuba, or the last of the Indian wars. The Hour of Charm brought a rustle of cornfields beneath midwest sun, the whisper of great rivers: the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Columbia; the heartbeat of a nation's land, salt soil, mountain, prairie, thin fields of cotton, hardwood forests.

Everything changed as ghosts put together their own lash up. Burnside's Nipponese soldier was first, but not alone. By the third day our ghosts had their drill down pat. The farside stepped forward as a Burnside story progressed:

Burnside parked in the dayroom and told how his uncle Henry saved a church after its congregation came up busted. The preacher buried uncle Henry in a likely field, then called the field a church cemetery and free of tax. As prices rose he sold the field, moved uncle Henry to another field... "...and Unc tax-exempted more land through the years than Alexander the Great. The preacher finally quit when the coffin wore out. Unc was holding up just fine...."

At that point doors and windows opened. They moved methodically, not slow, but no snap to it either. Some doors and windows were real, and real weather blew like a natural broom through the geriatric ward. From the freeway came rain-ridden breeze carrying car fumes. Puget Sound contributed a little whiff of salt, and northwest mist became a sheen of

moisture touching us like a thin coat of protecting fur.

Nurses closed windows, hissed at orderlies who closed doors, and staff had Burnside singled out for blame before the last breeze choked. Burnside, caught mid-story, sat blinking, silent, his tale-spinning out of balance as surrealism took over; because another door opened in the center of the dayroom, and this was a door of tribulation through which only we geriatrics could pass. Staff saw nothing.

The door opened on a scene, like rushes for a movie in which no one would want to star. An enormous room lay before us, and ranks of coffins shone dull and black before the backdrop of night. Silence as profound as eternity lay within that night. Silence resonated with power, silence that could be broken only by some mighty force, because the power of that silence swallowed all ordinary sound.

This was death, or at least part of it. Silence and darkness surrounded frail boxes containing remains even more frail. No spirits lay enclosed there, only corpses embraced by that greatest of all silences, embraced by final darkness.

Nurse Johnson sat as the single mourner, and her low sobs were the only sounds powerful enough to break that silence. Her face was barely composed, her lips tremble as they moved in prayers or confusion, her eyes red from weeping. She seemed such a small figure huddled before eternal night. We sensed her confusion, her loneliness, failure, sorrow; and we knew that each of us in that dayroom rested in one of those coffins. We knew the future by recognizing we were the past.

Nurse Johnson is a very good kid in a very bad world. We fight pain with pain, but she does not understand that, and sometimes it doesn't work all that well, anyway. The coffins sent a message, or seemed to, and the message needed figuring because it said: Take care of this young one, and maybe you are not lost. There is one more job to do. Figure it out, you sergeants and corporals and warrants. You once stirred the depths of history the way bakers stir cake mix. Get it figured, Jerks.

The enormous room, standing before eternal dark, now became shaded as if night pulled the curtain on dreams as well as life. Light drained into dusk, and movement began among the coffins. They did not open so much as they peeled away, like the droop of decaying flowers. The coffins vanished and we, the congregated souls of the V.A. geriatric ward, lay coffinless. Old bodies stretched frail as tissue across bones fragile as the

frame of a child's kite. We, a museum of the dead, lay in diminishing light. Then, sinking into darkness, our bodies disappeared and only a touch of light remained, like a wisp of smoke above dead faces; old faces; closed eyes behind which lay departed hope. The curtain of dark came down. Our faces vanished. The only sound to register through eternal night was the sound of Nurse Johnson sobbing.

II

"Come out of it. Please do." She gently shook my shoulder, because she is used to dealing with frail things. Nurse Johnson stood beside me as, it seemed, half the staff of this enormous place flurried around the dayroom. Shocked patients muttered to themselves, or turned toward each other with looks of belief, not disbelief; and belief had us running scared. Even senility cases looked in touch, and no damn quarrels started over what was illusion and what was real. People looked at each other, and silent messages passed. Nobody had seen anything. Pass it on. Make it clear even to those dumb Marines. *Semper Fi*, jarheads. Zip your lip and your fly. Shut down the detail.

"It's okay," I whispered to her. "At least I think it is." When she takes my wrist for a pulse, or Burnside's wrist, her touch is firm but gentle. When she's troubled her touch is that of a woman who loves. I do not say "lover," but one who gently, whether motherly or sisterly or even as a lover — touches with perfect knowledge of how affection is shown. At such times Burnside stops his mouth with stutters. He turns a shade once known as panty-pink, which is the most blood he can summon for a blush.

When she takes my wrist I remember my first young love. Years shrug away like scabs from the skinned knees of youth. I feel weak as a ten-year-old who coasts his Western Flyer into a tree.

"We had hallucinations," I whispered. "It happens among cripples and sad sacks. I blame it on the New Deal. I even blame it on Eleanor. There was a time back in Indiana when we let the cats out...." Then I began to mumble. Nurse Johnson is used to geriatrics wandering in their minds, but she's also accustomed to me and Burnside.

"Don't do this," she told me. "Dementia is bad enough when it's real."

I would never say "bullshit" in front of a lady. "After Harvey passed you kidded Burnside," I whispered. "Did it help?"

She whispered back. "Are we really talking? Are you serious?" Her whisper is like dandelion down riding warm breezes. Where was this woman when I was her age and lonely? Not born yet. Ships pass, and I would rather die than put up with being young again. Since that's what's going to happen my attitude is wholesome. At the same time, ships pass in history and not just on ponds.

"I'm serious," I said. "You conned Burnside. Did it help you? Not, did it help Burnside, or me. Did it help you?"

"It made me sad. It was fun for a minute, and then it made me sad."

That was not the answer I expected, and sure as gospel didn't want.

"All suffering is wrong," she said. "Dog suffering is wrong. Even bug suffering is wrong." She struggled with some sort of nursish ethics, and decided in my case to make an exception. "Corporal Harvey...." She honestly choked, a genuine chokeup.

"It hurt him." I tried to make my voice kind. "It's supposed to hurt. Part of the rules."

Around us staff moved with the caution of a combat patrol. They whispered to patients, and glanced at doors and windows. V.A. hospitals are not supposed to be weird. They are supposed to be palaces of dependability, dull as prunes.

"You beat the Bible," I told her. "The Bible gives us three score and ten. You helped Harvey make it for ten years beyond that." I stopped. She did not want to hear that. Her thought lay elsewhere.

"His spirit died," she said almost timidly. "Something awful is chasing you guys."

I sat frozen. Someone turned up the volume on the television. Soap is soap, but terror has some shape to it. Around me staff settled patients back into manageable routine, and patients looked at each other with unspoken promises to talk as soon as we got rid of staff.

Something awful chased us. It was not only what Johnson said, but the way she said it. Something awful.

Memories flashed. We once had our m.g.s dug in on Hill Seven-twenty in Korea, losing more men from freeze than from enemy fire. Ice. Snow. Blood on snow. Chinese corpses lay strewn across roads and fields and

ditches like seed, frozen, mouths open, ice on their teeth. Here and there smoke plumes rose where our troops burned farmers' houses in order to stay alive. Oil on the m.g.s froze, making their action sluggish. Hill Seventy spelled Hell on Earth. Nurse Johnson talked about something worse.

Nurse Johnson is a kid, but a kid with experience. She hasn't seen as many men die as I have, because that would amount to several, but she may have seen a couple dozen. If Harvey died differently she would know. I shuddered before a chill. I sat feeble and helpless. My teeth clicked.

Hill Seven-twenty was a comfort because you knew that for the rest of your life you would never be more miserable. This was different. We now spoke of something after death, and my chill came because of Johnson's words, and because ghosts waved goodbye. Burnside said those goodbyes made him uneasy. I wish to God I could settle for "uneasy."

"I'm not a preacher," I told her. "What do you mean, 'spirit'?"

"I'm not a preacher either, but when Corporal Harvey died nothing happened. Nothing."

"I don't read you."

"Absolutely nothing."

"You were tired."

"Absolutely nothing."

When men die they sort of expire, assuming they are not blown to bits. Something happens. The person leaves. Nothing romantic about it, nothing impressive. They just go until they stop, and then stop. Sometimes the body ticks on for a second or seconds. The point is, no matter how minuscule, something always happens. There is a stepping off, a final sigh or choke or spasm. Always. When you turn out a light bulb you are aware that light departs. It goes quick, but there is a "going away." Same with men who die.

And with Harvey nothing happened. Something nailed him before he could give a final shrug. I mourned Harvey for exactly two seconds, and would mourn more later — if there was going to be a "later."

Nurse Johnson trembled. "I should keep quiet when I don't know what I'm talking about."

In general that's true, because it stands her in the ranks of the rest of the world, but in this case it wasn't true. "You did me a favor," I told her. "Maybe you did all of us a favor. Will you help me to my room?"

Helplessness is the lousiest of lousy feelings. Around here we pretend independence, but could not defend ourselves against a bouncing puppy;

and at our age a bouncing puppy can kill. One stumble, one fall. The clock was running. If something popped Harvey, it waited to pop us. We had little time for defense, were physically capable of squat. This would take brains, and half the brains in this asylum are covered with dust.

Ghosts accompanied us as Nurse Johnson led me to my room, wispy ghosts who made no points. These were people I never knew or even shot at. They were vaguely oriental, maybe Malay, and small but pretty. They went nervously about their business, but even in these polished halls I could smell, like an echo, the sharp scent of cordite. If they were Malay the cordite likely came from Japanese artillery. These Malays sort of chirped in that soft, island language that seems all vowels, and Nurse Johnson led me through packs of them. You can get used to anything.

I wondered what Burnside saw, and waited in the room knowing he would come a-rolling any minute. Nurse Johnson parked me, patted my shoulder with a gentle hand, and went about her business.

Ghosts passed before me, around me, and it really didn't matter. They are around us, always, and we pay no attention. They are spirits of the past, and the past is friendly. The reason to understand history is not to avoid the mistakes of history — because some fool will make those mistakes for you. Some maniac will start a war, and some other maniac will drop an atom bomb, and you'll be the poor bastard who gets to drop the bomb or be hit by it.

No, you understand history so you can understand yourself.

When Burnside wheeled into the room he looked like a man who needed the chaplain. His chair moved slowly, the tattered battle flag not lifted by any breeze, and Burnside was a man who had the crap knocked out of him. He swung into bed like he aimed to stay for the duration. Not a good sign.

He turned on his side. Then he fidgeted, didn't like the idea, turned on his back and stared at the ceiling. He didn't like that either, so he sat up and did some truly magnificent cussing. He swore quietly, like a man talking to a jammed carbine while fearing the enemy is in the neighborhood and close. He didn't repeat a word. It was stupendous cussing. Inspired.

"...like a garage sale at a mortuary," he said finally. "Ross, we're boogered on this one. We got a Chinaman's chance in Toyko, that's what we got."

I didn't contradict, but if ghosts wanted to nail us, why bother to get elaborate? Our ghosts seemed trying to help.

"They're trying to tell us something," I said to Burnside. I did not say anything about Harvey. No reason to send Burnside into deeper funk. "Plus," I told him, "other ghosts seem trying to help. Your Japanese kid was never on staff around here before."

From beyond the doorway the hall filled with murmurs, and from the dayroom a voice raised in a thin cry. One of the senility boys sang "...you don't know what lonesome is 'til you get to herdin' cows...." followed by, "here's to the captain, here's to the crew, and here's to the girls...." and somebody hushed him.

"I copped my first feel, at least the first feel I remember, when I was six." Burnside seemed about to become senile himself. Either that, or this was more b.s. I waited for a Burnside story — waited for the end of the world — for the dead to rise — for the second coming — for a face-to-face with whatever dark evil waited to axe our spirits.

"...there was no call to kill that kid," Burnside whispered. "We could of worked something out. We could have both kept running." His voice became harsh and controlled, the kind of voice a noncom uses when he reads out a total screwup. We take pride in not feeling sorry for ourselves, but Burnside took it a little too far. He had bullshitted around this issue for his whole life, and now the b.s. didn't work. He would not be talking harsh if he was not eating away on guilt. You'd think, after all these years, the Japanese kid would be at peace. You'd think Burnside would have come to terms with it. Instead he sat, wiped, totally blown out of town.

"Shish kata ga nai. It can't be helped," I said to him. "It was a fatality, a fatalism. Forget it."

"He was skinny at the time," Burnside said in a voice just above a whisper. "They were on short rations. Skinny and sick and dirty in that crappy way you only get in jungles. He had diarrhea. Even after he died."

The kid looked better as a ghost. Clean uniform, healthy smile. Death seemed to agree with him. I wasn't proud of the way I thought. There is b.s. and there is sick b.s. I whispered, "Good luck, soldier."

"You know how it goes," Burnside said. "He maybe wasn't the first, but he was the worst. Dammit, Ross."

I knew what he meant. I also owned problems in that line, but didn't want to think about them...and thanks for the memories.

"Both of you were wrong," I told Burnside, "especially him. He was a soldier who acted like a priest. He sentenced you to life. You lived it. He didn't. You're both kicked in your ornaments." Some kind of flak erupted in the dayroom. A quavery voice began reciting poetry in the sing-song-y manner of schoolkids. The guy tried a passage from "The Wreck of the Hesperus." Memorized in about sixth grade. He got it wrong, but mostly right.

"I'm so damn popular," Burnside said, "because I overcharge and do poor work." He lay down, turned his back to me. "If something's gonna happen, let it."

Men sometimes acted this way in Korea. Temperatures dropped. Chinese artillery pounded. Chinese attacked. They came in swarms, and there did not seem enough explosive in the world to stop them. After the heat of attack, and as sweat began to freeze deep in our clothes, a man might climb into his sleeping bag where he would not be warm but could keep from freezing. And, the man became pupa, determined not to hatch. Men did that when they gave up. You couldn't even kick them out of those bags. Men died in attacks because they lay snuggled in, refusing that last ration of hell the world so generously served.

"I got a problem," I said to Burnside. "I don't have the strength to club your sorry butt."

He grunted. "I know a guy," he mumbled, "that when he dies is going to have his ashes sprinkled on a farm in South Dakota."

"...a thumbnail history of the Japanese on Guadalcanal," I told him. "Courage, combined with stupidity, does not make successful soldiers. Think about that before you check out." Here he was, talking about his ashes while I'm sweating his spirit.

Still, it was *his* spirit. One man, one vote.

I sensed movement in the far corner of the room. Mist slowly gathered, and movement in the mist did not seem occidental. If our ghosts tried to help then Burnside lay as perfect fodder. The mist might contain a clot of Burnside's personal ghosts. I didn't say a word. Just shuffled away on legs not exactly inspired, but feeling less worse than usual. The Japanese kid, and maybe an entire slew of ghosts, formed up to do a number on Burnside. Either ghosts are a metaphor for history, or history is a metaphor for ghosts.

NURSE JOHNSON would think I was a real gadabout. I moved back toward the dayroom feeling grim. Absolute Evil exists. As kids we geriatrics learned all about it, and no damn social worker had better come along and blame "evil" on "conditions." Evil is a force in the universe, a force using any weakness it finds to do its dirt; and with Evil, Hell is just a sideline.

My mind sorrowed. Harvey had been snatched. He was an old, old soldier, but inside him lived a spirit that was blithe. If his spirit lay hostage, or destroyed, even ghostland took a loss.

Besides, Harvey was a good friend. We weep no tears, knowing he would be too proud of us to weep for us. Still, there are such things as invisible tears. Nurse Johnson weeps them, as well as the other kind.

And then there is Nurse Johnson, a good kid in a bad world. Her world reeks with folk who hold no beliefs, or cheap beliefs; people who hope, when they die, to report to Saint Peter with clean bowels. They worry about cholesterol while their kids shoot each other down in the streets.

Nurse Johnson lives in a nation that whines over self-inflicted wounds while claiming itself a victim. At least the people I walked toward did not have minds filled with that kind of shinola. Like everyone else we are filled with a certain amount of crap, but not *that* crap.

...something feathered around my mind, almost like the touch of inspiration portrayed in Victorian pictures, or the whisper of someone long dead who wanted to pass me a tip. I almost understood our final act, and why we must act. Then the feathery thing went away. I started counting backward from 100; it's the classic test to see if you've got Alzheimer's. The feathery notion might return, because 99 went to 98, and so forth....

Evil uses Hell as a parking lot, and you don't have to die to park. Evil sets people in the middle of war, famine, excess prosperity, or other of Hell's appurtenances, then stands back as people freeze or sizzle; and screw themselves. The main interest of Evil is destruction of faith in gods and ethics, knowledge and honor. When faith is destroyed people create their own hells, and a sign stretches across the universe writ large for all to see. It reads: The Future Is Canceled.

Maybe it was not simply our spirits at risk, because, as the world turns, faith these days is doing hard time. Maybe Nurse Johnson, and all the other fine people I didn't know, but who must be in the world, were

at risk. When faith is destroyed, what happens to those who are faithful to their trust? I tottered along figuring that if evil was after me I could stand it, but if it came for Nurse Johnson then this pilgrim was pissed.

No sound came from behind me, but ahead sounded a mixture of querulous voices. Mortar fire properly timed sounds like tearing paper, and so did the voices. Distance to the dayroom is sixty feet. At flank speed I could have made it in two minutes, but my own ghosts picked that moment for their own.

I leaned against a wall and found myself looking down at a misted valley-plain of rice paddies, and for once I owned the high ground. Rocks lay scattered around a low crest of hills. Behind me rose a stark mountain blasted black by gunfire. My squad had our light thirties dug in across a broad ridge in Korea, early in the war. I watched the plain, watched ground mist rise from the paddies, and knew this was a rerun. I fought against doing this twice, because no one sane would want to do it once.

Five white specks appeared in the distance and moved toward me. I knew them, did not know their names. They were patriarchs, five old men dressed in white, men who should have died in the quiet security of their homes, surrounded by sons and daughters and grandchildren. They were men who had once been the man I would become, old, not wise, but smart for their day and time.

They moved slowly through mist, as reluctant as I to again confront madness. In mist behind them, like on a movie screen, rose pictures of a few faces of Hell; reels of Pathay News, the March of Time; buildings breaking beneath artillery, walls crumbling about women and children crouching in cellars. And from the far, far distance, far at sea, tattered life jackets still afloat, bobbing, the heads of sailors so thriftily held above the waves now turned to bleached and polished skulls.

The old Koreans moved toward me. Armbands with Korean writing showed them as Rok, Republic of Korea, allies. Two carried old-fashioned, long-barreled squirrel rifles, because there were bandits in these mountains. The other three walked with staffs. As they approached they smiled, but that is not the way it went the first time. The first time went like this:

My squad dug in behind a low ridge overlooking a valley. We had a long, thin line not well armed. We did not have enough men across a broad front, and North Koreans banzaied one section of the line, then another.

They kept it up all afternoon. We stacked them up like cordwood, and they stacked us.

Night came down moonless, darker than the bottom of a nighttime sea. Only our ears hinted at movement in the valley. From far, far away an occasional moan or sigh sounded as dying men lay alone, because neither side of the line so much as wiggled. There might be wounded out there, or it might be a trick.

The North Koreans hit again at midnight. They banzaied the left of our line, then banzaied again. Night came alive with tracers, and action rolled beneath flares as our mortars illuminated the valley. The attack was too far to our left to mean anything, except indignation. The attack made so much noise we could not tell what might gather right in front of us.

I froze to the pistol grip of the m.g. We heard nothing. No flares danced overhead. Night seemed concentrated, pointed, directed at our very sanity. Night seemed ready to explode with oriental voices, faces, the screams of a mindless horde, hell-a-poppin', Hell incarnate.

Then, to our left, the second attack stopped. Flares snuffed, darkness returned. The valley once more seemed covered with the dying.

"My momma didn't raise me to be a ground pounder," one of our guys whispered, "so what are we doin'...." and then he shut up.

Slightly to our right and so close as to seem underfoot, a noise clicked. Wood on rock, like a rifle butt carried too low. To my right the other m.g. opened at that first snick of sound. Riflemen fired blindly, hysteric. I fired like one insane, like a man trying to kill the night, finally forcing my finger off the trigger before the barrel melted.

From right in front of us came a cry, "Ai-gue! Ai-gue!" Then a torrent of words, and then a single voice, "Ai-gue! Ai-gue!" I burned the rest of the ammo belt, the m.g. bouncing like a mad instrument as I rose, trying to get further depression. The voice sobbed. "Ai-gue. Ai-gue."

"Do that sonovabitch," someone yelled. "For Chrissake, stop the noise."

One of our guys hopped over the ridge, stumbled, then emptied a carbine in the direction of the voice. Silence. Silence. We shivered until dawn.

Korean bodies are no more remarkable than Chinese bodies, but they wear different clothes. As first light crept across the sky, lumps of white shone nearly luminescent on the downhill slope. Light gathered to show the banzai attack we fought so hysterically was no attack at all. Five old

men, two nearly headless from repeated hits, lay with white beards running red. White clothing shone black-stained with drying blood. The corpses lay small and tangled. They lay like the death of history.

Our company commander appeared through morning mist, checking the line, doing his job. He looked over the ridge, looked at the corpses, said, "Musta been one whale of a fight," and walked on down the line. We sat fully ashamed, wondering "what the hell," when along came a corpsman who knew a little Korean. He said "Ai-gue! Ai-gue!" means "My Lord. My Lord."

Now they stood before me. Koreans are taller than most orientals, and these old men stood straight but not stiff. I leaned against the wall, waited, wondering if this was going to be death or a dry run.

They waited as well. Very polite, but not Jap polite. Koreans take a different fix on good behavior.

"Don't think I haven't thought about it," I told them, and did not know whether words ran from my mouth or only from my thought. "You guys were probably trying to cut a deal for your village. Maybe with us, maybe with the North. You carried two flags, depending on which army was in your neighborhood, and you did it to protect your kids."

They smiled. Koreans are not inscrutable, at least not when they're being honest. One nodded. I actually saw them relax, like a sense of relief swept over them.

"And you heard all that fighting to our left, so you skirted the action around the base of that ridge." I watched them. So far, so good. They watched me with interest. "But your mistake was to move at night. You could not tell where the lines were dug in."

The tallest one framed the word, "anio," "no," with his mouth. No sound. Just the shape of the word.

"Then you had to move at night?"

The mouth framed "neh," "yes."

"Then you were the advance...." I broke off, knowing after all these years, why those men suddenly appeared under our guns. Their entire village must have been fleeing south. The enfiladed valley could not be crossed. These old men led, trying to find a way across the ridge and onto the mountain before the sun rose over their women and children. Their young men would have been gone, pressed into service by the North, or held prisoner by the Allies.

"I pray your people made it," I said, "and I honor you."

They turned to look across the valley where people worked in rice paddies, where farmer's houses sat small and distinct, and where raised paths carried the normal traffic of normal living. I heard music few occidentals can really understand, saw forms and shapes of costumes and dress, saw children sitting beside grandmothers. I saw old fashioned cities, quiet streets, small shops, colorful flags and ornaments and decorations — life before machine guns, before communism and capitalism and the ambition of generals.

And then the scene changed as across the valley rolled a totality of darkness. It came crashing like a tidal wave, and, churning like a wave in the darkness, were flashes of neon, the static of electronics, the buzz and hiss and crackle of a brave new world. The old men stood facing the surge and thump of modern times. They stood squarely, waiting the approach of darkness, then stepped toward the darkness for all the world like men headed into an all-out fight. Darkness rolled toward them, the valley disappeared, and the scene faded, dispersed, and I found myself leaning against a hospital wall and pointed toward the dayroom.

It was about as much action as this child could take. I inched forward looking for a chair, even one before a TV. I would park my carcass and take a blow. Unreal spooks lived on television, electronic spooks with names and haircuts; mindless noise. It wouldn't be the same but it might be restful. I wondered how Burnside made out back in our room. I wondered if Burnside's ghosts were having any luck. I halfway wished he would show up.

In the dayroom patterns of light swirled, illuminated faces, cast shadows; and nothing looked restful. Light danced phantasmic as aurora borealis, flashing across old faces, wattled necks, scraggly limbs. Where normal light should fall through large windows, darkness glowered. Oppressive gloom lay beyond those windows. Even as I watched gloom fell to darkness, impenetrable, empty, deep as reaches of space. Black was not simply a presence, but an aggressive absence of light. It backgrounded weirdly illuminated figures of my companions, made them into pictures surreal as effusions of Dali — fearsome as improbable laughter issuing from the depths of mausoleums.

Each person in that dayroom was surrounded by his own ghosts. Ghosts of the enemy mixed with ghosts of the Allies. Reinforcements

seemed to be coming in from everywhere. I wondered if this was a last bastion, a place of some fateful and final resolution. I lined myself up in the direction of a chair and putzed forward. I heard the swish of a wheelchair.

"Be thankful for bald-headed people," Burnside said. "Ross, I got a problem." He wheeled his chair in front of me, twirled a couple of circles, and Burnside's mouth might be tossing a minor load of b.s. but the line across that mouth was firm. The old sarge was back on top of things.

"You're looking better," I told him. "Have you gained weight, or have you done something with your hair?" It was obvious that Burnside's ghosts had given him some sort of reason to quit pouting.

"...getting stuff settled with that kid. It cheered him somewhat." Burnside looked around the dayroom. "...like old home week at the pearly gates," he muttered. He watched some of the action, shook his head; steered his chair between me and the goings-on like a machine gunner covering a retreat. "The Good Book says 'This too shall pass,' and I've found that's always true, except in the case of gallstones."

"Welcome back," I told him and found a chair. The TV bubbled mindlessly as I watched the dayroom. What with all the silent messages between ghosts and geriatrics, what I saw was wild and less than wonderful — like a Chinese fire drill — the Greek airforce — the Estonian navy.

Mostly what I saw was blood and neon, history and the present, everything mixed; and, as everything mixed, darkness grew as people and ghosts became diminutive. We were getting cut down to size by darkness — and where it came from — what it wanted — I could not tell.

"Did you ever hate anybody you were shooting at?" It was a dumb question in Burnside's mouth, the kind of question an old soldier is not supposed to ask. There are standard attitudes toward the enemy, and old soldiers are supposed to know them.

I was still pretty shaken up. My breath came fast and shallow. "Only when they shot back." That was not strictly true. I did not hate the standard Kraut or standard North Korean, but the German S.S. would never rest peaceful in my mind.

"Because," Burnside mused, "they were just dog soldiers. Doing a job. Nothing to get hateful about."

Either Burnside suffered a conversion, and angelic wings were about

to whisk him to heavenly realms and walls of gold, or else his ghosts told him something that made him confidential. He talked about pretty personal stuff.

"The Bataan death march," I told him. "So much for your dog soldiers."

"You're a man of many parts, though somewhat scattered. Don't crap me about the far east."

What I know about the far east mostly has to do with broken cities and broken bodies. I did not spend time on R&R, and did not spend time on occupation. "History itself is scattered," I said, "and don't crap me about Bataan. I reckon you've been in touch with the farside."

We watched the dayroom, the encroaching dark, as the show began to fade. Geriatrics stood wiped out. Ghosts winked out. People stared at empty space, then turned to each other; murmured, touched hands, checked the "realness" of people and things. They jiggled chairs before sitting, just to be sure the chair existed. They did not sit quiet. Each and every one of those kids started beating his gums.

"Toyko and peanut butter," Burnside said, "and if that isn't the damndest?" He watched our troops jaw at each other. "Makes you yearn for South Dakota."

Darkness faded, but glowered as it faded. Darkness might disappear along with our haunts, but it seemed to wait just beyond the daylight windows. It was there, pressing, and it would come for us in its time.

"Get a little more exact," I said. "Peanut butter?"

"We're sitting pretty here," Burnside said, "and Ross, you've become neglectful. What I'm gonna tell you is straight dope."

I waited for another Burnside story, figuring he would bull around some little while before getting to the point. It was a mistake. If you hit Burnside with an expectation he'll usually exceed it.

"Our fifty-first state," Burnside said about Japan. "We raised a whole generation on peanut butter."

Oriental diets are generally thin on protein. During the occupation some very bright people used peanut butter to raise protein levels among children. The kids, being kids, lapped it up.

"One thing led to another," Burnside said. "By now those kids are hurting and don't even know it. I find it less than fascinatin'."

"You and the farside had a go-around. Then you haul out of bed and get cracking. Now you're blowing smoke. What?"

"The Japanese kid showed me Tokyo. Tokyo ain't Tokyo anymore," Burnside said. "It's a damn party. Something's dying in the Jap spirit. The past is dying, but something else is dying." Burnside has never been real subtle. Furrows on his forehead did not stop where the hairline had once ended. "I don't get it," he told me. "My ghosties said the same thing Harvey said: 'Get off your goldbrickin' butt and get an honest job.'"

That would have been an interesting conversation, except our ghosts weren't talking. Burnside imagined things.

"Payback time," he said. "It's the least I can do for the kid."

He really fretted about his Japanese soldier. Bad enough we tried to figure a message, now Burnside had to get his morals in gear.

"I got roughly the same message from Korea," I told him, "but it came from the countryside, not the city."

Burnside looked like a man in mourning. "Her name was Yukiko. I should of brought her home with me." Burnside was saturated in guilt up to his starched little dickie. "During '44 she lived in a cave with her family, avoiding bombs. Her best memory was when they caught a stray cat. It was the only meat they had in '44."

"The rules would seem to indicate," I told him, "that if you start a war you really can't complain when people drop bombs on you."

"She didn't start it, you didn't start it..." Burnside wallowed before an abstraction, and Burnside is not Houdini when it comes to abstractions.

He tried to say something more, and failed, but sparked that feeling in me that I somehow knew our final act.

"You're the guy with the gift of gab," I told him. "Check around. See what's up while everybody's still talking."

I had a piece of thinking ahead of me and didn't need help, especially Burnside's. "Get it right," I told him, "because we won't know what to do until we know what we've got. The time-line of history is getting a little thin."

Burnside nodded, checked me over to make sure I sat firmly settled, and wheeled away. Sometimes he reminds me of a kid in a soap box derby.

III

NO ONE RECALLS THE NAMES of dog soldiers who fought beside Leonidas at Thermopylae, or with Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours; but how they fought, and what they fought for, lives through centuries. Without those forgotten men western civilization could not have come into being. They put it all on the line, because there are times in history when universal evil crawls from its cave of darkness.

When those battles happened, though, what did anyone know? The dog soldier only knew that some fool Persian had it in his head to whip the world, or a Moorish chieftain was on the prod.

And the dog soldier stood. He stood between the enemy and home, standing before a way of life that was particularly his. If in his home he was boss during peace, then during war he paid for the honor. The male of the species defends his land and home. It will always be that way. At least that is true of the Infantry.

Some such thoughts flicked through my mind, more certain than the flickering of television. Around me people who hadn't spoken to each other since they arrived started talking. Some who never talked at least tried to come from behind a camouflage of silence.

There are not enough of us here to make a platoon. We are a small group, and like other forgotten soldiers are about to become a mere dot on the wall map of the past.

Yet, the far side charged us to step forward one more once. I asked myself: what did we have to give that could be of any possible use? If anyone here was rich he wouldn't be parked at V.A.

So what use are we? Burnside hopes to die exhausted in a cathouse with the sweet-sweet taste of bourbon on his tongue. My own ambition is less raunchy. I want, at age ninety, to be gunned down while storming the Congress.

And that, of course, is so much bull. Burnside will die in bed, or of stroke in his wheelchair. Considering the remnants of his prostate, he wouldn't make any kind of show in a brothel, anyway.

TV light flickered here and there about the room. TV doesn't claim me much, but sometimes I watch light flicker on darkened walls. The rest of our troops face the screen, but I'm engrossed with flickering. Sometimes

it looks like distant shellfire, and sometimes like cities burning. Sometimes, though, greens and blues chase reds away, and walls of the dayroom seem mysterious as haunted woods, or, when yellow happens, like meadows on a spring morning.

I watched the flickers, thought of modern times, and it came to me that we've never stopped fighting. When our wars ceased, a rearguard action began. We fought against deterioration of order; and lost as an old culture died and society went crazy at the funeral. Yammer got crowned King, with chatter its Queen.

At least bull keeps us from becoming maudlin. We do not deify the past, as the flickers rise upward. No one here believes in Lawrence Welk or Eisenhower.

I watched our troops clam up whenever a member of staff approached. Even Nurse Johnson had trouble getting more than a simple greeting. At the same time, people hard-of-hearing talked confidentially at the top of their voices. In a little while staff would decide that something on TV had driven us nuts, that their personal worlds ran normal; and they were doing their jobs. Humans, being creative, can rewrite anything.

...which is a coy way of suggesting that each young generation invents history according to its own bigotries. The rewritten history gets quoted to show that one or another special group has perpetually saved civilization while suffering abuse known only to holy saints. The justification for historians is the same as the justification for janitors. Both sweep up the mess when the public gets done trashing.

Nurses and orderlies mingled, picking up a bit here, a bit there. Nurse Johnson acted smarter, which is usual. She hung back and listened. She touched people's hands, arms, and moved like warm music. Nurse Johnson is the best of what remains good about the world. She should work in pediatrics, not a geriatric ward...except, I've already said that, and it isn't true. I suggested it once and she said she prefers geriatrics. What she actually said was, "You guys talk ornery as skunks, but you take care of each other." Then she said she had already worked in pediatrics, and some people don't love their children.

Nurse Johnson comes to me in dreams and I am young. Curiously, she comes as a long-loved friend, or as a wife of many, many years; although in the dreams we are both too young for that. Or, she comes like innocence

that was once adolescence, of hand-holding in movies, the dark screen flashing images of love or action while hands, not yet fully grown, twine fingers in an ecstasy of investigation; learning that this — this touching in this sweet way — explains all there is to know about the word "happiness."

I must have dozed off. Old men do that, fall into bemused sleep. Then flaccid muscles cramp, joints scrape like bone against sandpaper, and we awake. Pain is nature's way of mentioning that pharmaceutical companies enjoy an array of opportunities.

The Hour of Charm was underway. Our troops sat pooped, worn, busted and beat from all the excitement. If any mouths yapped they yapped to themselves. If consensus had been reached I hadn't heard, and half of these palookas had forgotten it by now. The dayroom sat solidly quiet except for TV. TV spooks discoursed as if believing it meant something. As I came fully awake the main show stood in the windows facing the cemetery. Ghosts no longer impressed me, but this thing did. The figure stood like a hologram of black on deeper black, standing more needful than the king's ghost in the rampart scene from *Hamlet*; and like the ghost of *Hamlet's* father, the figure beckoned. Worse, it waved me forward in the time-honored infantryman's signal to advance.

I needed this the way guys in trenches need head lice. At the same time, who could pass up such an opportunity? I made it to my feet. My walker trembled, although, natch, I walked steady as mountains. The figure in the window waited, and maybe the dayroom stayed bright but darkness rose before me.

Something resembling Corporal Harvey stood in irons, like a man foot-bound on a chain gang; but only Harvey's eyes told any kind of story. They shone not wild, not crazy, but were great pools of sadness, a sadness portending universal judgment, universal sorrow. Worse, it seemed the figure stood in a steadily increasing wind.

That Harvey, who was once so smart, was now mindless, also showed in the eyes. Only sorrow lay there. Intelligence, if it remained, hid inaccessible, remote to Harvey, forgotten by Harvey who now stood as the ghost of a ghost of an old soldier.

The ghost of a ghost must surely be a walking memory. I felt the many memories of darkness surrounding this hospital, this century, the lives

and deaths that skip or trample or stumble across time; and darkness stood before me like a slab of slate.

...sooner or later one of us had to get brave as well as smart. I edged past the windows and onto the terrace. The terrace seemed normal; tables, chairs, a long distance view of the city which swelled like a boil between Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains. From distance came the roar that attends cities, and it pounded and twisted, cooed and pulsed. Light flashed above dark streets, light from skyscrapers, aircraft, and searchlights dancing above used car lots.

The cemetery started about fifty yards away, and ran across the face of the hill as ordered as a bank statement. The poor bastards kicking daisies were still lined up in ranks. White slabs shone dazzling in surrounding darkness. I wondered, as I had wondered before, if flunkies or gremlins came at night and polished those slabs.

Further down, the woods began, and beyond the woods the bridge, park, bandstand; all broken now, but in the distance still giving the appearance of sanity and order.

Darkness stained but did not obscure the landscape. It fell backward as I advanced. Darkness moved slowly, sullen, like an animal on defense but not cowed; or it moved with calm assurance that my days were short and its patience long. I searched the face of darkness and Harvey was nowhere seen, but I right away saw how Harvey had been snatched. When men die — and I nearly have a couple of times — they are occupied. Dying is what they're doing, their job. They don't pay attention beyond the job, and that happened to Harvey. He was taken while his attention pointed elsewhere.

"I try to run a couple months late. That way I avoid the crowds." Burnside whispered as he wheeled next to me. "We got a merry little hell on our hands. You'd better take a seat." It is not like Burnside to whisper.

"Something's coming clear," I said, and did not know whether I spoke to Burnside or Harvey or darkness. "You can only picture the future based on what you know about the past. If history dies the future can only be hideous."

"I owe my brains to my poetic nature," Burnside said, "because at least one of us is sensitive. Sit."

I hovered above my walker and regarded darkness. I now knew what it was, but just because you can name a thing does not mean you understand it.

"Fan out to my left," I told him, "like you're going to flank." I moved toward the edge of the terrace, where the concrete slab stops and grass begins. Burnside wheeled left, then rolled slowly along the edge. I watched darkness pause, retreat, become sullen as a spoiled child; more dangerous than a teenager with a Mauser. It backed five or six yards downhill. "You're right," I said to Burnside, "we do have a merry little hell, and a firefighter's in the offing." I turned, found a chair near the edge of the terrace, sat. Darkness ceased retreating.

"Tell me a story," I said to Burnside.

"Nurse Johnson calmed the troops. The kid is a peach." Burnside looked downhill. In the center of darkness stood mean terrain; a gentle slope that begged for enfilading fire, a young forest to distribute shell bursts, a rickety bridge crossing a ravine that only a torrential river could love; and a haunted park. I listened, really listened as Burnside turned factual. For the first time I understood why he made top sergeant in the old Army.

"The situation ain't just tactical," he said, "it's strategic. If the damned thing was solid enough to put a fork into, you'd see the movement of armies, and they'd move across hemispheres."

"Not that I'd doubt someone who's saintly...."

Burnside raised a hand to shut me up. "The dayroom has guys who have been everywhere, and it has ghosts from everywhere. This is no crap, Ross."

"How solid is it?"

"That's the trouble," Burnside said. "You can't lay a glove on it. But, what we're up against is dark as the inside of a snake, and that's not a bad picture. It throws coils."

As he talked a theme repeated over and over: darkness cut with flashes. Our men saw Rome and Madrid, Paris and Berlin, London town and Athens. They saw Hong Kong, Sidney, Bora Bora, the Falklands, Murmansk, Tunisia; and every place looked the same: thundering noise mindless as carnival rides obscured all silence, and fires rose not above military encampments, but above schools; not above shipyards but above mosques, cathedrals, meeting houses, while ceremonial dragons fled before encroaching night.

I looked into distance at the city, a dark city cut with flashes. Nurse

Johnson lives somewhere in that city. Somewhere, in an apartment with a roommate or a lover or perhaps only a cat, Nurse Johnson irons dresses, fixes dinners, perhaps listens to light rock or jazz. She grows an ivy, or, more likely, a philodendron, and her kitchen curtains are a happy color, red, or orange, or blue with yellow ducks. Beyond the glow of that apartment darkness crouches. Nurse Johnson probably does not know it is there. Or, because she is young, she does not know how fast it can hit and how hard.

"You've been to college," Burnside said, "so what the hell is happening?" He rolled back and forth along the edge of the terrace, and he watched his movement cause slow waves in the darkness. "The kid's gonna be here any second, so spill."

I did not know if he meant his Nippon soldier or Nurse Johnson who would be about to go off shift.

"You're a cupcake," Burnside said to the darkness. "A Nance, a lollipop, a Shirley Temple; you're a pint of pup pee, and your ma remains disappointed...." I raised my hand. When Burnside starts on insults it can take a while. He looked at me. "Why are we worked up? It runs from us."

What to tell him? Should I tell about the burning of the great library in ancient Alexandria?

"It doesn't give a damn one way or other for us," I told him. "It's come after what we remember and believe." Behind us a door swung open. Nurse Johnson, about to go off watch, stepped onto the terrace.

She stood silhouetted against darkness, and did not see the darkness. Her mouth pursed, and her face became a study in determination. Her slight form concentrated on immediate tasks. Her thoughts shaped to tell us goodbye. I wondered how it was for her working in a place where every goodbye might be a last one — which is a cliché — but around here really true. How often had she said goodbye to a patient, only to come to work next day and find he was dead?

"I saved you gentlemen for last," she said in a low voice, "so don't try to snow your girlfriend. Something is happening and it isn't nice."

"Mickey Mouse is only Mickey Mouse," Burnside told her, his voice grim. "Old Mickey ain't supposed to be a national hero."

She looked my way. "You're the one who keeps this guy on a leash. Does he make the least smidgen of sense?"

"He misses South Dakota and the Dust Bowl. Burnside's turning into a duffer..." It wasn't going to fly. Nice try, but it didn't work.... "When we talked about Harvey you told me something awful. You were right."

She straightened, looked around, stepped to the edge of the terrace. Darkness pulsed, moved uphill toward her. If Burnside and I did not sit on that terrace, darkness would engulf her.

Burnside muttered something about darkness, so low she could not hear, something moderately filthy.

"What I tell you stays between us," I said. "If it gets out we'll have shrinks and social workers. Our people see ghosts. We see what snatched Harvey."

"And 'scared' ain't in it," Burnside told her. "Our guys feel mean as mange. They're talking 'fight.' They're growing new teeth and toenails...one of the curses of being sober."

"I almost don't believe in ghosts."

She was stating part of the problem. If ghosts are a metaphor for history, then belief is a leap into reality. If history is a metaphor for ghosts, matters get really serious.

"You believe the part about Harvey being snatched." I watched her and cursed my imagination. The fires of history burn hot and long, but memories of fires do not burn long enough. Nurse Johnson does not know that women and children are always first to be devoured. They do not die by ranks and squads and armies, but helter-skelter, the casual victims of forces headed elsewhere; forces blowing aside populations like chaff. Nurse Johnson is one strong young woman, and she knows more about suffering than almost anyone else her age...and she ain't seen nothing.

"I know what I saw." Now Nurse Johnson whispered about Harvey. "I have to do something. We can't..." and she stopped, because she about said "we can't have any more getting snatched," and she about said it while standing between seventy-eight- and eighty-year-old guys. She bit her lower lip, tried to grin, made a poor show. "You're right," she said. "We don't need social workers."

We had a doomed situation. Nurse Johnson was going to go through her share of pain and sorrow. No way out of it. No way to break it gently. I decided not to break it at all. At the same time, I couldn't betray her. "Keep staff off our backs," I told her. "It's our problem." Not true, Nurse

Johnson, it's your problem too. "And if we can't handle it we'll give you a ring."

"You're really seeing ghosts?" The nice thing about Nurse Johnson is her ability to stop being a nurse and start being a woman when anything important happens. "You sound okay."

"I wish it was DTs," Burnside said, "but it ain't."

"You've never seen a bad case of DTs," she told him almost absent-mindedly. "What are you guys going to do?"

"Fight back," I told her, and then lied. "I'm not sure how. Keep staff off our backs. We'll work it out in a day or so, maybe more."

"You'll tell me?"

"I will." What a liar. I'll tell you after it's over, Nurse Johnson. News from nowhere.

She patted Burnside's bald head, which made him blush, touched the back of my hand, and left.

"Hard to win a war unless you win the battles," Burnside said.

"If we just sit still we'll get picked off one by one."

"I never made notches on my rifle or my bedpost. Seemed like cheating, somehow."

"Now I know for certain the world is gonna end," I told him. "You just confessed to being a gentleman."

"I can stand being decent," Burnside told me, "for as long as we keep it private. Plus, the fickle finger seems to be pointing our way." I could not tell if he understood what he talked about, or if this was more bull. On some level he knew we had to go into this clean; no jam on our face.

It is a creature of dissolution. It wakes when minds of men become narrow, secular, vengeful; and at some point it turns foul and crawls among us remembering flames of Inquisition.

I spent my working life patrolling the past. Now I patrolled the future. "One more battle," I told Burnside.

"If it makes sense."

"When did any of this crap ever make sense?"

"It can't be worse than the Canal."

It couldn't be worse than Hill Seven-twenty. I looked across the terrain. Hill Seven-twenty was worse, but the enemy had only been North Koreans. I thought of them, thought of how they banzaied, courageous as

madness can make a man, running into the mouths of guns because a politico told them their country was attacked. I wished I had a battalion of them.

"I hope," Burnside said, and not to me — his voice tight and not conversational — "that being dead has taught you something about soldiering."

His Japanese ghost stood beside him. It's amazing about kids, whether Nurse Johnson or this kid; how the best of them can stand rosy with ideals and still firm as duty. This kid's smooth face was serious as combat, yet his lips did not conceal an excited little smile. I looked him over, thought of his record, and was not sure we wanted him.

"Step up to the edge of the grass," Burnside said. "I won't let nothing happen."

The kid stepped forward. Darkness tumbled, reached uphill, but did not manage to advance. On the other hand, it didn't retreat, either.

"You better stay out of this," Burnside said. "There's some real meanness down there." Burnside rolled forward, his chair side by side with the kid. Darkness did not flee, but it rolled backward at a faster rate. "Runs like a bunny," Burnside said, "but it don't run from ghosties. At the same time ghosties help." He looked up at the kid. "You bringing company?"

The kid pointed his index finger at his chest. Alone.

"It don't pay to be brave and stupid both," Burnside told the kid. "Think it over."

The kid smiled, then raised a fist without smiling, and then winked out.

I watched shadows creep across the terrain. Darkness lay beyond the city, but these shadows were natural darkness which approached with normal things like TV news, and supper, and pills. Hurry sundown.

"I'm thinking about symbols," I told Burnside. "Flags and such."

I'm thinking about recruiting posters...."

"Even given help, I don't see us winning."

"You're right about one thing," Burnside said, and no bull shone through. "I miss the Dust Bowl. Who would of ever thought?"

"The jarheads seem in pretty good shape."

"I talked to them. They actually turned out right smart. Their brains

ain't never been used for nothing." As we left the terrace, darkness clustered within approaching night.

Among old men, night and day are interchangeable. Night is only dark, and not even that because subdued light illumines the hallways. We wake to think, or wake to pain. Most do not fear death. Our fears are fears of weakness, of peeing your pants, of becoming senile. The crotch and the brain are the engines of history.

When I woke I felt sluggish. Silence lay between snatches of Burnside's gaspy breathing. Since he did not snore he was in some stage of waking. Beyond our room the dayroom would be swept, polished, silent as mice. The main desk down the hall way would shine like a halo of heaven above the history of this place, the history of a century...in Flanders Field where poppies...antique clustering of fear and fight.

I thought of saying something to Burnside, then thought silence best. As silence became restful ghostland explained itself. Or, at least I understood how some things fit together.

The darkness in the dayroom had not been real. It was a message from ghostland about the darkness beyond these walls. The sight of coffins was a warning. The shenanigans of ghosts waving goodbye were also messages, desperate but colorful. The whole show was a hypothetical guidon, a flag, pointing toward foulness that stalked our perimeter. Our ghosts were helpless without us. It seemed that we old men were not only told to protect the future, but also to protect the past.

"I'm thinking of the disciplinary barracks at Leavenworth," Burnside muttered. "Right now it seems like a warm and happy place, real safe and friendly."

He understood most of what we faced. I had halfway hoped he did not, there being no sense in both of us feeling doomed. I decided not to explain about Harvey.

"I worry about my great grandkids," he whispered, and embarrassment almost choked him. "Keep that private. There's times I think we're guilty of a teeney bit of b.s."

Had Burnside undergone conversion and become a fledgling saint? When great grandchildren visited we pretended we were uninterested. We pretended all was well with them.

I lay in darkness, mute, without an ounce of tears or sweat, although I needed both. I lay in darkness admitting even I had managed to conceal truth beneath a pile of crap. For old men, Hell comes in two versions, lesser and greater.

The lesser version happens when history is rewritten, their records expunged, no credit given for ideals or aspirations, nothing bequeathed, all tales revised as the Present, turning, points to a false record and accuses the past for Present suffering.

That's a stern Hell, but the greater version is worse. Hell for old men arrives at that exact moment when we must admit we can no longer protect our kids, our families, our country, the shards and remnants of our love.

"I don't understand why it runs from us. It don't run from ghosties."

"We have the power of memory. We have the memory of order, and we still have voices. When memory dies civilization dies." From three or four rooms down the hall, a nurse stepped softly. No, two nurses, because two women murmured. Breeze sighed at the windows. I wondered how many of our people lay awake, listening, wondering about our worth, unable to show our loves, and, like Burnside, settling for feeling guilty. The soft padding of rubber soles moved away, the murmurs quieted.

"It's after a great deal more than us. We're in the way."

"I don't mind a scrap," Burnside said, "but not if it don't make sense."

"Flags are symbols. Words are symbols. Steeples are symbols. Red lights in front of cathouses are symbols. The world don't know it, but the world lives by symbols, some good, some as bad as flags."

"Dead guys don't drive wheelchairs. There's got to be advantages."

He had never talked about being crippled, except to make a joke. I thought of the tedium, of the many days and years in that chair, of the iron a man has to have in heart and soul in order to face each morning.

"I got to pee, and I was never one to favor bedpans," Burnside said, no longer muttering. "See you in the funny papers." He swung out of bed, a shadow in the darkened room; the last time I saw him alive, and all I really saw was a shadow.

Oh, Nurse Johnson, you don't know how fast it can hit, and how hard.

I DOZED, WAKED, FRETTEd, dozed, then came fully awake with the rough knowledge that Burnside would not make roll call. AWOL from the V.A.

Silent halls filled with echoes, voices of fear and hope. Somewhere in darkness Burnside made his move, and voices of the past sent whispers into that same darkness. Whispers sped like hushed and urgent messengers patrolling against a silent-walking enemy. Ghostland seemed poised for either success or disaster, and with nothing in between. Outside, in darkness, a storm rose on Shakespearian wings. Black feathers of storm rode gusts tumultuous as passion. Darkness surrounded, clasped; a coffin of wind and rain in which a man becomes breathless and shroud-wrapped.

I sat on the edge of my bed, cussing Burnside. This deal was supposed to include me. I sat with despair of a kind known only during times of total wreckage. Helpless to act, to change matters, helpless — but, I told myself — not doomed. Not without a fight. Meanwhile echoes sighed and whispers moved through hallways.

I stood, already heavy with grief, and made my way to a window; opened it and listened. Rain rode cold gusts blowing off salt water. Rain hammered on leaves of trees, and water gurgled in drains. Rain pelted its ancient song, and the lyrics of that song say "May God have pity on the Infantry."

Behind me sounded a rustle of clothing, and the pad of soft-soled shoes. An orderly stood, breathing hard. I had been unable to find tears earlier. I had them now. I did not turn.

"Where?" the guy said, and said it rough; a guy who already knew his tail was in a sling. No "yes sir," "no sir," "please," or "go to Hell."

"Mind your manners." I still did not turn. My voice choked only a little.

"Him and them two candy-asses," the guy said. "I'll settle with you later." He hoofed it, almost running.

"You win the first round." I spoke into the rain and dark, speaking to Burnside wherever he was. "All Hell is about to break. What you need, pal, is a miracle; you and your damn Marines."

I turned, headed for the dayroom toward people of my own kind. Grief is easier when tough-minded folk stand together and don't kid themselves about the odds.

Burnside needed a miracle, okay, but what he got was television. Search parties spread from the hospital, people — scared mostly for their jobs — bundled against rain. Headlights cruised the road, and police spotlights flicked through shrubbery as dawn rose gray and cold above the scene. No searchers imagined Burnside headed through the cemetery and downhill. It wasn't in them to imagine. They figured he went to town, or, like a senility case, wandered in a fog toward pretty lights and racket. As day broke, and in spite of attempts to keep a lid on the mess, somebody tipped the television. A traffic helicopter churned its course across the backside of the hill, one bumfoozled way to make the morning news.

The three lay on muddy ground pounded by northwest rain. A camera reported bodies like bundles of soaked rags, small, sprawled, distorted; and although news anchors knew nothing of combat, even they pretended to be impressed. The bodies lay fanned across the lower hill. Burnside made it to the bridge, actually had one hand touching the bridge, but did not get onto the bridge. Burnside lay as small and raggedy as any other dead soldier. No angels sang. A Marine sergeant lay just below the treeline, the body tangled in that awkward shape of corpses that have suffered breaks and fractures. Another Marine sergeant lay at the edge of the ravine. A torn Japanese battle flag tangled in brush within the treeline, hanging like a spot of blood and not a spot of sun; the kid a beautiful kid, but no Samurai.

The man at the ravine still lived, but had become insane; his mind and hands clawed back up the hill, his body weak, powerless to save itself. When medics brought him in he still clawed at air, fingers hooked, his voice gone from screaming.

We patients looked at each other, muttered, shook our heads. TV showed bodies hauled out by chopper. The Marine lay lumped beneath a sheet, his knees tucked up; stiffened, probably broken. Burnside, with no legs to speak of, made a lump under the sheet like a muffin or a dumpling.

Patients did not have everything figured, but knew enough to wonder how Burnside got euchred, or how he screwed up. Orderlies watched us as if we were kids on a playground, while we thought of basic infantry tactics.

Staff looked at each other to find who was guilty. Staff did not believe three old men — one a cripple — could go two hundred yards downhill without help. Staff blamed each other, dug political foxholes, dodged responsibility.

As this went on, doctors squared shoulders like little men and blamed everyone, patient and staff alike, for betraying some high purpose known only to docs. And, when Nurse Johnson came on shift, she took the brunt. Staff blamed the day shift for not giving some warning imagined only by the night shift, and Nurse Johnson was lead nurse on the day shift.

"At least," one little prick said to her, "We're rid of your main trouble maker." The punk had bad teeth, a manicure, and he smelled the way he looked; which is to say "floral."

Nurse Johnson did not answer. Nurse Johnson looked to her patients.

"Good riddance," another said. "Caused me nothing but trouble. Why do I always get the problem cases?" This guy looked like he spent most of his time trimming hair from other people's noses.

Nurse Johnson asked no question. Her form was stiff, her face controlled. Unless you knew her well, you could not spot her confusion.

No one but we geriatrics could understand why those guys went out like that. And we, by God, were not about to enlighten. The farside joined us, and every mother's son and daughter on that ward felt more in tune with the dead than with the live theater that quacked and moaned around us.

All through the morning hours spirits of men and women appeared with stony faces, and there were no antics. Burnside lost. It might well be that our last chance was lost. A sense of tiredness, a sense of doom, rode darkly through ghostland. The farside still had feelings, because it did what we were doing; which is to say it hid them. A few women wept, and one Japanese woman seemed shocked beyond all feeling except eternal sorrow. If her name was Yukiko perhaps she wept for Burnside. More likely she wept for the kid. I didn't want to know.

And if everybody felt guilty, or felt anger at being trumped, I had them beat. I had not told Burnside about Harvey. At the time I did not want to send Burnside deeper into his funk. Burnside walked into a mousetrap, an ambush, pressing back an enemy more dark and dangerous than even he believed. I screwed up. I should have told him. Should have.

On the other hand, he was the guy who jumped offsides. I had figured we'd use another day for organization, planning; and then Burnside goes in like a kamakazi, or the Lone Ranger. That one figured easy, and to each his own.

I would have slowed them up. Either that, or Burnside tried to keep me from walking into it. I think the first, because the man knew how to soldier. If he could have found more guys who could keep up he would have waited.

During the Hour of Charm I took inventory of our troops. Three wheelchairs, their people mighty frail, two Wacs, both tough little princesses, one fused spine, three mental blanks who drooled, two bedridden, one goldbrick, two mobile but getting over operations, a bosun.mate with one arm and an appliance instead of a hand, and a blind quartermaster...the bosun mate looked pretty good, the blind guy didn't look too bad. I took myself to the terrace to think.

The terrain lay unchanged. The broken bridge still stood. The broken bandstand in the park remained. I wondered if Burnside had had an objective, or if he just drove the enemy ahead of him until he dropped. The whole business lay ringed with mystery, with improbabilities, but also with certainty of total destruction if we failed. There might be total destruction if we succeeded, but that was someone else's problem. We could only set the standard, write our last will and testament through action, and hope someone could still read deeply enough to raise arms against the encroaching night.

Darkness glowered behind the city, reaching into the normal light of late afternoon; and it stretched toward the little park but did not enter. The bandstand stood empty in mixed sunlight. Some remnant of battle must remain, something halting an advance. The ghost of a ghost may be more than a memory. It may be a piece of history that refuses to be rewritten.

Maybe something was still left of those men. Maybe something was even still left of Harvey. Maybe Burnside had not completely failed. One thing was certain. I had very few hours to screw around.

After a battle there's a time that lies in between, a time of pause after bodies are collected, buried, or shipped. A vacuum exists between actions. The enemy does not yet arrive although the population may flee. It serves as respite, but it's not a good time for long range plans, or being born.

It might be possible to get as far as the park, to establish a position around that little place of order. Burnside and company had already absorbed the initial licking. The whole business was one of symbols, without which we cannot live. Symbols of evil abound. The world needed

that symbol of order, a small Victorian park. Maybe the world would not avoid final darkness, anyway, but we could offer the world a chance.

We own the power of memory, and the memory of order...a door opened quietly behind me. Nurse Johnson, of course. A good kid in a bad world. Her footsteps sounded hushed across the terrace. She remained silent at first, standing beside me and looking at the terrain. The world went quiet. I could hear her breathing, practically hear her pulse.

"He was in a wheelchair," she whispered.

"He angled back and forth across the hill. When he got to the woods he dropped out of the chair and did body-rolls. Where he couldn't roll he used an infantryman's crawl. You don't need much in the way of legs. You need shoulders."

Silence returned. She did not blame me. She is not like most other people. She doesn't see her patients, or her neighbors, as problems. She's old-fashioned enough to grant room without a lot of explanations.

"They must have had reasons."

"If I explain," I told her, "it won't mean anything. It has to be discovered."

"I miss him badly. I miss all of them, but he was so ornery. Suppose I have to miss you too?"

From inside the ward, but faintly, some guy sang tuneless as a bluejay... "I'll be seeing you..." Sure, buddy, of course, right, you bet. Nurse Johnson's face came alert as a new mother hearing her baby squall. "You're too good for this place," I told her. "You shouldn't have to worry about a bunch of worn out carcass...." She raised her hand to shush me. The guy stopped singing.

"I don't want to lose any more of you." Her voice remained hushed. Slabs in the cemetery glowed beneath streaks of sun. A flag, that in other days you didn't have to be ashamed of, hung limp.

"I make no promises because I can't," I told her. "We may be playing out a script written half a century ago." — More than that, Nurse Johnson, because it may go back to WWI. — I thought of all the courageous people I've known through the years. "I don't know why anyone would want to be a nurse," I told her. "I'm glad you are."

"Why would anybody want to be a soldier?" Her voice sounded husky. She controlled tears.

She doesn't know anything about Thermopylae. She is vague about the Battle of Britain. "There's blessed few who want to be soldiers," I told her. "Things happen." I felt a presence at my side, caught a glimmer of white in the corner of my eye. I didn't even need to turn in order to know that my Korean patriarchs were there, all five of them, three with staffs and two with those silly damn squirrel rifles.

"I have to do my job," she said, and it was obvious she didn't see my Koreans. "I figure you're going to try another heist." She showed more sadness than I've ever seen, even from her. "This place used to worry about what was good or bad. I can't be here every minute."

"Burnside was crazy about you," I told her, and that was the truth. Then I told a lie, but one that seemed fitting. "You're the only woman who ever made Burnside blush."

"I'm not above a little flirting." She tried to smile. "And it helps keep the guys alive. Plus, it don't cost a red cent." Then for a little while she wept.

I wanted to touch her hand, tell her it was okay, say how much her toughness and honesty meant. I wanted to say a whole lot of things; but of course there are things you shouldn't do, even if you could.

IV

HOURS PASSED. I hobbled here and there, lining up the action — old folks at home — supper came and went. I talked to Quartermaster Wilson, a good man and surprisingly sane. When a guy has been blind these fifty years you don't expect his brain to amount to much. Wilson figures he has precious little to lose, and it may feel good to be needed. TV bubbled around us, and evening news forgot Burnside in its pursuit of a new sensation; fornication between politicians and lady trust officers. I talked to Bosun Tilton who will lead us, because for this job we need legs, not hands. We press the enemy backward with memories, with the power of history, with scenes of sense and order.

Meanwhile, the ward remains tranquil on its face. The two Wacs hold court, and the b.s. level rises and shifts in their direction...a couple of real cute tale spinners, real purveyors, and who would've ever thought? The

girls have set up a deal with the wheelchair guys, and the girls are conning staff out of its collective drawers. The Wacs are spellbinders, and our guys gather round them. Staff eases off, relaxes, sees things as normal, lets down its guard. Our people seem curiously free, some for the first time in their lives, and even the senility cases are more or less in touch. Light flickers against walls, red and black like cities burning, but the ward sits busy planning while pain comes to the evening Neilsens. Our troops set about using their last resource, their helplessness, to provide cover.

And ghostland surrounds. And ghostland remains voiceless. And ghostland reaches toward us, promissory of help or support; or maybe grateful for just being remembered. We have Japanese here, a few Germans. We have Africans from Kraut rubber plantations, and native coast watchers from the islands. We have mule skinnners from the Burma Road, and resistance people, French and Greek and Eyetye, Dutch and Norwegians and Belgians; Russian and Polish horsemen.

And nobody brings a flag. We have Laps and Turks, Brits and Aussies; Waltzing Matilda. Music runs more faintly than echoes. We hear few marches, mostly ballads.

And soon it will be time to go. And if anyone hears this tape it may mean that you still have a little time. It may mean that one of us got through.

I come to the terrace, watch the night, and muse.

Across the terrain light swirls as faces of Hell appear, the Twentieth century condensing in a way that would make jealous the good folk at Reader's Digest...this blood-saturated century.

As if on a movie screen the world's first operational tank appears, moving like a tilted triangle, squashing trenches and barbed wire. The first machine gun speaks, and the first airplane engine revs and purrs, spits and pops. In the background the first radio quacks about 1920's sex scandals while selling chewing gum and snake oil. Napalm flares from later wars and the Victory V hangs like a checkmark above blown bridges, shattered cathedrals, smouldering rings of fire where once stood huts of thatch.

And the message says that, unless it is stopped right now, it all begins again; the old hatreds, the egos rampant, the fists raised proclaiming that one or another god grants the right to yell instead of think. The message says that each time the world forgets how Evil exists, Evil gets a resurrec-

tion, and the word "honor," extinguishing, turns to smoke.

But there once lived men who knew that some things were worth dying for. There once were women who fought for their own, and fought for others as much as they were able.

In a geriatric ward a body is no big advantage, anyway, and so this is how it shapes: we can't form the future but we can show responsibility.

We'll not exactly perambulate singing, but we're going to go, a bunch of old men, some weak from operations; one blind with strong legs, one with eyes who can guide while leaning on the blind, another with a pincher for a hand; old men led or followed by ghosts of former allies and enemies fanning downhill against a void. It needs only one of us to get across that bridge in order to establish a presence, and we go with little hope of rescue; not of Burnside, or Harvey, or of ourselves. Nobody here weighs much more than an angel. We suppose the bridge will hold.

And the comrades we leave behind, and the girls we leave behind will form our cover. The two Wacs plan a ruckus just before dawn. The wheelchair guys will feign seizures. Staff will be overworked, too occupied. We'll slip away, as silent as the farside, as silent as memory, with smallest hope of helping fallen comrades, but with no farewells and no apologies, as the farside weeps; as even ghostland waves goodbye.

This story is for Wesley Baker, Bill Deen, Jim Hall, Don Farmer, Fran Ross and Mieko Riggleman.

The tale of the five Korean patriarchs is adapted from The Last Campaign by Glen Ross, Harper & Bros., 1962.

The phrase "shiranu ga hotoke" does not mean "aw screw it" as reported. It translates: "The buddha is dead," and it is used by the Japanese when something incredibly stupid or vulgar has happened.



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COMING ATTRACTIONS

PUNDITS SAY summer reading should be light fare. Obviously, we ignored that rule in our July issue, so we decided to remedy it in August. For the prime beach reading days of the year, we have an issue filled with fun and humor with just a touch of dark.

Our cover story is science fiction of the old school. Or at least, one of our more outrageous writers' take on Golden Age sf. Ray Vukceвич gives us rayguns, buxom heroines, and ugly and terrifying lobstermen in his spoof "White Guys in Space." While Cathleen Thole's cover lacks a brass brassiere, it does depict Our Heroine pouring coffee for the evil lobstermen. Golden Age sf might look a little tarnished after this...

Jerry Olton also provides humor in our August issue. His is a bit more modern, however. Mary's block has gone downhill. At night, she has to tolerate drug deals, loud parties, and souped-up cars racing down her street. But things have just gotten worse. Late one night, she hears the unmistakable sound of a drive-by charming. Oberon's friends have moved in and they aren't leaving. This is only the beginning of a terror all homeowners fear, in "There Goes the Neighborhood."

Finally, as promised, a bit of dark. This time, it's provided by the master of dark fantasy, Ray Bradbury. This too is a neighborhood story that begins with late-night weeping, and ends with a ghostly visitation of unexpected proportions. "That Woman on the Lawn" is vintage Bradbury.

In future issues, we'll bring you a new Timothy Zahn novella. Tim has returned to the short form with a hard science fiction tale as only a Hugo-winner can tell it. John Crowley, Alan Brennert, and Ben Bova also provide us with science fiction. Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Marc Laidlaw, and James Patrick Kelly add fantasy to the mix. And Steve Perry, Ron Goulart, and David Gerrold make us chuckle. So keep your subscription current.

SPECULATIONS

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I'M COLD,
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ON MY BUTT.
(SHOOP,
SHOOP.)

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